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Politics of Memory and Politics of Genocide: Prospects for Reconciliation in the Post-Genocide Rwanda

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Abstract

In the aftermath of the genocide, the Rwandan government embarked on a series of reconciliation initiatives aimed at building social cohesion and forging a new unified vision of Rwandan people. However, the government has increasingly assumed the role of a memory regime by regulating public discourse and shaping collective memory through the politicization of the genocide, the promotion of official historical narratives, judicial proceedings, educational policies, selective representations of victimhood, and de-ethnicization. These objectives are pursued through various institutional and social mechanisms, including re-education camps, traditional justice systems, public education, the media, and local surveillance practices. Under these circumstances, state-led efforts to promote national unity may undermine rather than facilitate genuine reconciliation, particularly when they constrain the pursuit of justice, open debate about the past, dialogue among divided groups, respect for human rights, and tolerance of difference. Rather than fostering an inclusive process of reconciliation, existing policies risk exacerbating social tensions, encouraging self-censorship, and reinforcing authoritarian tendencies. This article argues that the Rwandan government's reconciliation policies and politics of memory have become significant obstacles to the long-term reconciliation of Rwandan society.

Keywords: Politics of Memory; Genocide; Rwanda; Reconciliation

Introduction: Historical Origins and Dynamics of the Conflict

Ethnic identities have long constituted a contested subject in both academic scholarship and the historiography of the Great Lakes region of Africa. Hutus and Tutsis, alongside the smaller Twa minority, have historically shared a common language and religion and have been interconnected through social relations and intermarriage (Morrock, 2010, p. 64). Nevertheless, colonial and earlier historiographical accounts frequently represented Tutsis as migrants originating from Ethiopia or Asia Minor, while characterizing Hutus through purported physical differences, including darker skin and shorter stature (Prunier, 1995, pp. 7–8). The historical validity and political implications of these accounts, particularly their claims concerning biological distinctions, remain contested. Vansina (2004, pp. 37–38), for instance, suggests that the emergence of certain perceived physical differences may predate the commonly assumed historical period by several millennia. More recent scholarship has increasingly emphasized the historically contingent and socioeconomic dimensions of Hutu and Tutsi identities, associating these categories with status, wealth—particularly cattle ownership—and access to political power (C. Newbury, 1988, pp. 11–12; 1998, pp. 10–12). These identities were not invariably fixed; under certain historical circumstances, social mobility and the accumulation of wealth could facilitate changes in status and identification. Moreover, regional affiliation, village membership, lineage, and clan constituted additional, and sometimes more salient, dimensions of social identity (C. Newbury, 1988, pp. 11–12; D. Newbury, 1998, p. 83).

Rwanda's colonial transformation began under German rule in the late nineteenth century and continued under Belgian administration following the First World War. Although German colonial rule was relatively limited in its institutional reach, Belgian authorities subsequently expanded their administrative influence and intervened more extensively in Rwanda's social and political structures. Colonial governance contributed to the institutionalization and politicization of Hutu–Tutsi distinctions, notably through the introduction of identity cards that formally classified individuals according to ethnic categories. As C. Newbury (1998, p. 11) argues, colonial authorities did not create these identities *ex nihilo*; rather, they reshaped their social significance and hardened previously more flexible boundaries. The formalization of ethnic classification subsequently constrained the possibilities for changing one's identification (Keane, 1996, pp. 16–17). Through a system of indirect rule that relied on the Tutsi monarchy and chiefly elites, Belgian authorities privileged Tutsi access to political authority, education, administrative positions, and ecclesiastical institutions. These arrangements reinforced existing hierarchies and contributed to the concentration of resources and power among favored elites, while many Hutus experienced systematic political and socioeconomic disadvantage (Doughty, 2016, p. 48). The monarchical system also relied on forms of compulsory labor and other coercive practices that imposed substantial burdens, including confiscation of crops, on subordinate populations (Mamdani, 2001, p. 97).

The Hutu Revolution of 1959 marked a decisive rupture in Rwanda's political trajectory, challenging the authority and privileges of the Tutsi monarchy and its associated elites. Following independence in 1962, the First Republic (1962–1973) and the Second Republic (1973–1994) institutionalized new forms of political exclusion, marginalizing Tutsis and exposing them to periodic persecution (Doughty, 2016, p. 50). These dynamics contributed to the emergence of a substantial Tutsi diaspora whose members faced political exclusion and insecurity both in Rwanda and in countries of refuge. The resulting patterns of displacement, exclusion, and contested political belonging became integral to the historical conditions preceding the civil war and genocide.

The organization of the Rwandan state is also essential to understanding the mechanisms through which mass violence became possible. Rwanda's high population density, predominantly agrarian social structure, and extensive administrative reach facilitated sustained interaction between state institutions and local communities. The administrative system extended from the central government through provinces, districts, sectors, cells, and villages, with *nyumbakumi*—units traditionally associated with ten households—serving as an additional mechanism of local organization (Thomson, 2013, p. 121). These administrative structures enabled state authority to penetrate everyday social life, influencing local decision-making, collective mobilization, and the circulation of information. The proximity of households and agricultural activities further increased the visibility of community members and potentially facilitated local monitoring. Rwanda's political organization has therefore been characterized by a territorial and administrative logic rather than by a system based exclusively on kinship or tribal affiliation (Gourevitch, 1998, p. 334). Such institutional density, however, should not be understood as inherently producing violence; its significance lies in how administrative capacities and local networks can be mobilized under particular political conditions.

The 1994 genocide emerged from the interaction of multiple historical, political, socioeconomic, and institutional dynamics rather than from any single explanatory factor. Scholarship has examined the roles of ethnic prejudice, political obedience, state surveillance, and organized mass mobilization in explaining the scale and intensity of genocidal violence. The civil war between the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) and the Hutu-led government (1990–1993), the instability surrounding political transition, economic crisis, heightened security fears, competition over land and local resources, interpersonal grievances, and social pressures within local communities collectively created conditions conducive to violence (Strauss, 2006, pp. 41–56). These dynamics also shaped the opportunities and incentives for civilian participation. Although Rwanda's centralized administrative apparatus facilitated the

transmission and implementation of directives from national authorities to local communities, administrative capacity alone cannot explain why individuals participated in genocidal acts. The mobilization of ordinary citizens also depended on the ideological legitimation of violence, the activation of historically embedded grievances, and the political construction of the conflict as an existential struggle.

Collective memories of historical injustice constituted an important dimension of this process. Among segments of the Hutu population, narratives of past subordination under the Tutsi monarchy contributed to perceptions of historical victimhood and accumulated grievances concerning political, social, and economic inequality (McDoom, 2005, pp. 17–19). These narratives were subsequently mobilized and reframed by political institutions, extremist parties, and media outlets. The civil war was increasingly represented as an ethnic confrontation in which defeat would threaten the political and socioeconomic gains associated with Hutu rule since 1959 (McDoom, 2005, pp. 20–21). By framing the conflict in existential terms, extremist actors sought to transform historical grievances into a rationale for collective action against Tutsis. The interaction between these ideological narratives, institutional authority, local power struggles, and social pressures helped legitimize participation in violence among segments of the population. Accordingly, civilian involvement cannot be reduced either to an ingrained culture of obedience or to the coercive capacity of the state. Rather, participation emerged through the interaction of coercion, incentives, ideological persuasion, and locally situated interpretations of the conflict.

The assassination of President Juvénal Habyarimana on 6 April 1994 precipitated the immediate escalation of organized genocidal violence. Extremist political and military actors used the ensuing crisis to initiate and coordinate the systematic persecution and extermination of Tutsis, alongside the killing of Hutus who opposed the genocide. Rwanda's extensive administrative networks and local surveillance mechanisms facilitated the identification, targeting, and killing of victims. The close proximity of residents in rural communities, combined with established channels of communication and local authority, enabled violence to spread rapidly across the country. Rwanda's historical experience of centralized governance, compulsory labor mobilization, and administrative penetration into local communities provides important context for understanding these mechanisms. Nevertheless, the relationship between state capacity, surveillance, and obedience must be examined alongside the political strategies and social processes through which authority was translated into participation. Rather than attributing genocidal violence to an essentialized Rwandan cultural disposition, this analysis emphasizes the historically contingent institutional and political conditions that shaped patterns of compliance, resistance, and civilian mobilization.

The genocide against the Tutsi unfolded over approximately one hundred days, from April to July 1994, and extended across much of the country. Estimates of the death toll vary, but approximately 800,000 people, predominantly Tutsis as well as moderate Hutus, were killed by government forces, military personnel, militias, local authorities, and civilians. Des Forges (1999), for example, estimated that at least 500,000 Tutsis were killed, representing approximately three-quarters of the country's Tutsi population. The violence involved systematic killings, physical mutilation, torture, and widespread sexual violence perpetrated by various state and non-state actors, including military personnel, political leaders, paramilitaries, media actors, and civilians. In many cases, victims were targeted by neighbors, colleagues, acquaintances, and even relatives, underscoring the extent to which organized violence penetrated everyday social relationships.

The genocide ended as the RPF advanced militarily and captured Kigali in July 1994, bringing the extremist government responsible for organizing the genocide to an end. Although the RPF halted the genocide and established a new government, its forces have also been implicated in serious abuses against Hutu civilians, including killings and forced displacement. These distinct forms of violence must be examined within their specific historical and legal contexts without obscuring the defining character of the genocide against the Tutsi. The post-genocide government subsequently pursued extensive political and

economic reforms alongside initiatives intended to reconstruct social relations and promote national reconciliation.

In the decades following the genocide, Rwanda experienced substantial economic growth, significant state-led development (Matfess, 2015, pp. 181–204) and an expanded international role, including participation in peacekeeping operations (Grayson & Hitchcott, 2019, p. 12). The country has also attracted attention for its comparatively high representation of women in parliament, environmental initiatives, tourism development, and investment in the creative industries. At the same time, concerns regarding restrictions on freedom of expression, human rights violations, alleged abuses in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and the concentration of political power have generated competing interpretations of Rwanda's post-genocide trajectory (Grayson & Hitchcott, 2019, p. 12). These tensions are particularly consequential for understanding the relationship between the state's pursuit of national unity and its regulation of public narratives about the past.

This article examines the relationship between reconciliation and memory politics in post-genocide Rwanda. Collective memory can contribute to reconciliation by acknowledging suffering, recognizing victims, and establishing a shared understanding of past violence. Yet memory can also reproduce exclusion, legitimize unequal power relations, and constrain public debate when particular interpretations of the past are institutionalized at the expense of competing experiences. In Rwanda, the relationship between official memory policies and reconciliation initiatives raises critical questions about whether state-led efforts to construct national unity necessarily foster meaningful social reconciliation or may instead generate new forms of silence, exclusion, and tension. The article argues that reconciliation cannot be assessed solely through the institutionalization of a unified national narrative; it must also be evaluated in relation to historical pluralism, accountability, inclusive dialogue, and the freedom to articulate divergent experiences of the past. The following sections examine theoretical approaches to reconciliation in post-conflict societies, the role of memory politics in shaping these processes, and the objectives, implementation, and limitations of Rwanda's reconciliation policies.

The Concept of Reconciliation and the Politics of Memory

The Concept of Reconciliation

Reconciliation can broadly be defined as the restoration of “normal” and constructive relations in the aftermath of grave human rights violations and mass atrocities (Leiner, 2018, p. 176). As a relatively recent concept in the field of conflict resolution, reconciliation represents an expansion of traditional approaches by incorporating insights from a range of social science disciplines. More importantly, it extends beyond the immediate objectives of conflict resolution by seeking to transform the motivations, attitudes, and beliefs that underpin and perpetuate conflict (Gardner Feldman, 2012, p. 7). In post-conflict societies, reconciliation is particularly significant because it can help prevent renewed violence and interrupt recurring cycles of hostility. It does so by reducing intergroup antagonism, fostering tolerance, cultivating critical consciousness, and encouraging a more reflective and less uncritical relationship with authority. The Rwandan case illustrates how the devaluation of particular social groups, combined with deference to authority and unquestioning obedience to political leaders, can contribute to the emergence and perpetuation of violence, particularly in societies marked by a history of victimization. When designed and implemented constructively, reconciliation processes can facilitate the development of peaceful relations between former adversaries. Conversely, poorly designed or politically instrumentalized initiatives may exacerbate existing grievances and transform them into protracted or intractable conflicts. Genuine reconciliation, therefore, is not merely concerned with the termination of hostilities; it also seeks to address the underlying conditions that may generate future conflict.

The literature identifies several distinct approaches to political reconciliation, among which structural or realist and psychological perspectives are particularly prominent. A further perspective, grounded in spirituality, emphasizes collective healing through the rehabilitation

of both victims and perpetrators (Tutu, 1999). Although these approaches differ in their underlying assumptions and priorities, they offer complementary insights into the conditions necessary for sustainable peace.

Realist or structuralist approaches prioritize security, economic interdependence, and political cooperation as essential foundations for stable peace and reconciliation (Kacowicz & Bar-Siman-Tov, 2012, pp. 11–35). From this perspective, conflicts frequently emerge from competition over scarce resources and the pursuit of material interests. In international conflicts, such competition often concerns territorial control and access to natural resources. Within societies, however, resource-based conflicts may arise from economic inequality, competition over cultivable land, the unequal distribution of wealth and political power, or even disputes over seemingly trivial material possessions, as illustrated by Sherif et al.'s (1961) classic study of intergroup conflict. Accordingly, structuralist approaches suggest that conflicts can be mitigated when competing parties reach mutually acceptable agreements concerning the allocation of scarce resources and the distribution of material benefits. By addressing the tangible interests and structural conditions underlying antagonism, these approaches seek to establish the material and institutional foundations for peaceful coexistence.

Psychological approaches, on the other hand, place greater emphasis on the emotional, relational, and identity-based dimensions of conflict, thereby extending the analytical scope of realist and structuralist perspectives (Nadler et al., 2008). In his seminal work, Burton (1969) argued that conflict may originate in the frustration or denial of fundamental human needs. Such needs include security, justice, autonomy, positive self-esteem, and the recognition of a valued identity (Nadler & Shnabel, 2008). When these needs are threatened or denied by opposing parties, grievances may become deeply embedded in intergroup relations, sustaining conflict even when material disputes have ostensibly been resolved. Feelings of humiliation, suffering, mistrust, and resentment, together with desires for revenge, can further reinforce antagonistic perceptions and perpetuate cycles of violence. From a psychological perspective, therefore, sustainable reconciliation requires more than an agreement over competing interests. It also necessitates addressing the underlying psychological threats that sustain hostility and transforming the identities, perceptions, and relational patterns through which former adversaries understand one another.

Within this psychological framework, Nadler and Shnabel (2008, pp. 37–56) distinguish between two principal pathways to reconciliation: the instrumental and the socioemotional. Nadler (2012, pp. 292–309) similarly conceptualizes reconciliation in terms of its relational and identity-related dimensions. The instrumental pathway places limited emphasis on revisiting past grievances. Instead, it prioritizes repeated cooperation in the present, enabling former adversaries to rebuild trust through the pursuit of shared practical objectives (Nadler & Shnabel, 2008, p. 42). This approach bears considerable resemblance to the contact hypothesis, according to which intergroup contact under appropriate conditions can contribute to the reduction of prejudice and antagonism (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2005, pp. 262–277). Both perspectives rest on the assumption that sustained interaction and cooperative engagement can gradually transform relationships characterized by distrust and hostility (Kriesberg, 2000, pp. 182–188).

The socioemotional pathway, however, places the past at the center of the reconciliation process by addressing historical grievances, previous wrongdoing, and the emotional consequences of violence. Apology, acknowledgment, and forgiveness constitute central elements of this approach. More broadly, reconciliation is frequently associated with the interconnected principles of truth, justice, apology, and forgiveness, all of which may contribute to the restoration of relations between former adversaries (Rosoux, 2009, p. 553). These principles are not necessarily interchangeable, nor do they always reinforce one another in practice; rather, their significance depends on how they are interpreted, negotiated, and institutionalized within particular post-conflict contexts.

Long and Brecke (2003) propose a related distinction between the signaling model and the forgiveness model of reconciliation. They argue that the signaling model is particularly applicable to international contexts in which the primary objective is to establish peaceful relations and facilitate the separate coexistence of former adversaries. The forgiveness model, by contrast, is more relevant to intranational conflicts, where reconciliation often entails the reintegration of former adversaries into a shared political community. This distinction highlights the fact that reconciliation does not necessarily entail the same degree or form of relational transformation across different contexts. Whereas coexistence may be a sufficient objective in some international settings, reconciliation within a society emerging from mass violence often requires a more profound transformation of intergroup relations.

Reconciliation constitutes one of the most complex and demanding processes of identity transformation, which lies at the core of psychological approaches to conflict resolution. For Kelman (2008, pp. 24–25), reconciliation requires each party to reconsider its own identity in ways that accommodate the identity and legitimate concerns of the other. This process involves reducing the negative and exclusionary elements embedded in collective self-understandings while creating space for more inclusive conceptions of group identity. Similarly, identity-based approaches emphasize the need to alleviate threats associated with collective identities, particularly those arising from the denial of recognition, status, security, or historical experience (Nadler, 2012, p. 295). Reconciliation, from this perspective, is not simply a matter of restoring relations between previously antagonistic groups; it also involves transforming the identities and interpretive frameworks through which those groups perceive themselves and one another.

The central implication of these theoretical perspectives is that effective reconciliation requires an integrated approach that addresses both structural and psychological dimensions of conflict. Economic development, institutional reform, and political cooperation may establish important conditions for stability, but they cannot, in themselves, resolve deeply entrenched grievances or transform antagonistic collective identities. Conversely, initiatives focused on acknowledgment, forgiveness, and psychological healing may have limited effects if the structural inequalities and political arrangements that sustain insecurity and exclusion remain unaddressed. A comprehensive reconciliation framework must therefore combine institutional and material reforms with efforts to address historical grievances, rebuild trust, and transform intergroup relations.

In post-genocide Rwanda, both the international community and the government led by Paul Kagame pursued a range of economic, social, and political reforms intended, at least in part, to support post-conflict reconstruction and reconciliation. These initiatives addressed several structural dimensions of reconciliation, including economic development, education, healthcare, and institutional capacity-building. Under Kagame's leadership, Rwanda recorded substantial progress in economic development, education, and healthcare, while attracting considerable international assistance and investment. Jessee (2017, p. 12) reports that international donors accounted for nearly 40 percent of the country's annual budget. International assistance supported a broad range of initiatives, including educational reform, healthcare provision, population management, gender equality, technological development, military training, legal-system reform, and transitional justice programs. These developments contributed to the reconstruction of state institutions and the pursuit of socioeconomic stability, both of which are important components of the structural dimension of reconciliation.

International actors also contributed to the pursuit of accountability through the establishment of judicial mechanisms intended to address the crimes committed during the genocide. The International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) was established by the United Nations Security Council in 1994 and operated until the completion of its mandate in

2015.[1] Its jurisdiction encompassed genocide, crimes against humanity, and serious violations of Common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions and Additional Protocol II. The Tribunal indicted 93 individuals for their alleged responsibility in serious violations. Beyond the ICTR, various United Nations bodies, human rights organizations, nongovernmental organizations, academic institutions, and civil society initiatives contributed to Rwanda's post-genocide recovery. Collectively, these efforts sought to strengthen accountability, address the legacies of mass violence, and establish institutional foundations for a more peaceful political order.

Reconciliation policies in Rwanda have also incorporated psychological dimensions, particularly through an emphasis on justice, acknowledgment, and forgiveness, alongside the use of traditional mechanisms of dispute resolution and transitional justice. These initiatives reflect the recognition that rebuilding society after mass atrocities requires more than economic reconstruction and institutional reform; it also entails addressing the social and psychological consequences of violence. Nevertheless, as the following sections of this article will argue, the trajectory of Rwanda's reconciliation policies raises important questions concerning the relationship between reconciliation, political authority, and the governance of collective memory. In particular, the increasing politicization of memory and the consolidation of authoritarian practices have raised concerns about the extent to which official reconciliation initiatives facilitate genuine engagement with the past or instead constrain alternative interpretations of historical experience. When reconciliation becomes closely intertwined with state-led memory politics and political control, its capacity to address grievances, foster mutual recognition, and achieve lasting social transformation may be substantially undermined.

Politics of Memory

In contexts of conflict, a critical examination of memory and history is essential, as the legacies of violence and genocide profoundly shape individual and collective perceptions of the past and present.The legacies of such experiences extend beyond the events themselves, shaping how individuals and communities interpret the past, construct their identities, and orient their attitudes and behaviors in the present. Memory, however, should not be understood as a neutral repository of historical experiences. Rather, it constitutes a politically contested domain in which powerful actors selectively reconstruct the past to legitimize prevailing social arrangements, justify contemporary political agendas, and shape collective understandings of historical events. As Connerton (1989) observes, "Images of the past commonly legitimate a present social order" (p. 3). From this perspective, the significance of memory lies not merely in its capacity to preserve the past but also in its role in legitimizing, reproducing, and contesting existing configurations of power.

Memory consequently operates as a significant site of political contestation, in which the authority to define, represent, and disseminate interpretations of the past constitutes a form of political power (Hirsch, 1995, p. 23). The selective construction and institutionalization of particular historical narratives can serve as mechanisms through which political actors establish legitimacy, consolidate authority, and marginalize competing interpretations. Although the politics of memory is necessarily oriented toward the past, its substantive content and political objectives are shaped by the exigencies of the present (Verovšek, 2016, p. 530). States and political elites mobilize a range of institutional, symbolic, and cultural instruments—including commemorations, days of remembrance, judicial proceedings, war crimes trials, media representations, cultural initiatives, monuments, educational curricula, and public history initiatives—to establish authoritative accounts of the past. Through these practices, historical events are not simply recalled; they are selected, interpreted, and incorporated into broader narratives that delineate the boundaries of legitimate political

[1] The International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) marked a historic milestone in international criminal justice, as it became the first international tribunal to deliver convictions for genocide and the first judicial institution to recognize rape as a means of perpetrating genocide. Through its landmark judgments, the Tribunal made a significant contribution to the development of international criminal law and established important precedents for the prosecution of genocide-related sexual violence.

belonging and collective identity. The relationship between history and memory further complicates the politics of historical representation.

As Hirsch (1995, p. 34) suggests, history involves the reconstruction of memory, rendering both domains inseparable from the political contexts in which they are produced and interpreted. Political actors may therefore mobilize historical narratives to construct, reinforce, or transform collective memories in accordance with particular ideological objectives. Such processes can facilitate the production of national myths, the selective appropriation of historical experiences, and the continuous reinterpretation of the past. However, the political instrumentalization of memory also entails significant risks, particularly when historical analogies collapse the distinction between past and present and encourage contemporary events to be interpreted through the frameworks of earlier conflicts (Hirsch, 1995, p. 33). The resulting narratives can influence how individuals and groups understand their positions within society, define their relationships with others, and construct their collective identities. Accordingly, the politics of memory constitutes not merely a struggle over historical interpretation but also an effort to shape political subjectivities and establish particular frameworks through which individuals make sense of the social and political world (Waehrens, 2011, p. 10). By regulating which aspects of the past are remembered, emphasized, or silenced, political actors influence not only what societies are encouraged to remember but also how they are expected to interpret and respond to contemporary events. In this respect, the politics of memory can be understood as a struggle between actors seeking to preserve the existing political and symbolic order and those attempting to challenge it through alternative interpretations of the past (Kubik & Bernhard, 2017, pp. 5–6).

The concept of collective memory provides a further analytical framework for understanding these processes. Kansteiner (2002) identifies two interrelated dimensions of collective memory: socially shared recollections of the past and the practices through which memories are produced and circulated (pp. 179–197). This distinction underscores that collective memory is neither a straightforward aggregation of individual recollections nor a fixed representation of historical reality. Rather, it emerges through socially embedded processes of interpretation, representation, and transmission that establish particular understandings of the past as collectively meaningful. The politics of memory thus involves the production and institutionalization of shared historical narratives that can serve contemporary political objectives. Within these processes, historical consciousness, collective trauma, contested narratives, and competing interpretations of the past become central to the formation and reproduction of collective identities. The analytical significance of collective memory therefore resides less in establishing a singular, uncontested account of historical truth than in examining how particular interpretations acquire social authority, become embedded in institutional practices, and shape individual and collective understandings of historical experience. As Maurantonio (2017, pp. 219–220) emphasizes, the interpretation and reinterpretation of traumatic pasts have profound implications for identity formation and the distribution of political power. Collective memory must therefore be situated within broader networks of social relations in which historical representation, political authority, and identity construction are mutually constitutive.

Moreover, collective memory cannot be adequately understood independently of the social contexts within which individual recollections are formed and sustained. Rather than emerging in isolation, individual memories are mediated by shared cultural frameworks, social relationships, and collectively available interpretive resources. As Halbwachs (1992) demonstrates, remembering is fundamentally embedded in social contexts through which individuals acquire the categories and frameworks necessary to interpret their experiences. Collective memory consequently encompasses individual recollections while simultaneously shaping the conditions under which those recollections become intelligible and socially meaningful. This reciprocal relationship between individual and collective remembering highlights the extent to which memory is constituted through ongoing interactions between personal experience, social structures, and dominant historical narratives.

Although collective memory can foster solidarity and strengthen a sense of communal belonging, its unificationist potential should not be conflated with the achievement of reconciliation. When collective identity is constructed around a politically prescribed account of the past, particularly one that privileges certain experiences while marginalizing or excluding others, memory can reproduce existing divisions rather than overcome them. This tension is particularly salient in post-genocide Rwanda, where the relationship between official historical narratives, collective identity formation, and reconciliation remains politically consequential. Sustainable reconciliation requires more than the establishment of a shared national narrative; it also necessitates critical engagement with the historical experiences, social consequences, and everyday legacies of violence. The institutional promotion of a unified collective identity may therefore generate tensions when it limits the public recognition of divergent experiences or constrains the expression of alternative interpretations of the past. In such circumstances, the pursuit of national cohesion may coexist with unresolved grievances and competing understandings of historical suffering.

In examining the Rwandan context, Mwambari (2021, p. 611) highlights the relationship between official and unofficial memory practices, drawing attention to the vernacular forms of remembering that develop alongside state-sanctioned narratives. These practices reveal that collective memory is not produced exclusively through formal institutions or imposed unilaterally by political elites; it is also negotiated, reproduced, and potentially contested through everyday social interactions. Nevertheless, the dominance of official memory regimes can restrict the visibility and legitimacy of alternative historical accounts, thereby consolidating a hegemonic interpretation of the past. When a dominant political narrative establishes the parameters of legitimate remembrance, competing memories may be marginalized even when they remain significant to the lived experiences of particular communities (Mwambari, 2021, p. 611). The Rwandan case consequently illustrates a central tension in the politics of memory; the same practices that seek to promote national unity and collective cohesion may also constrain pluralistic engagement with the past. This tension underscores the importance of distinguishing between the institutional production of a unified collective memory and the more complex social processes through which reconciliation is negotiated. Rather than assuming that a common historical narrative necessarily produces social cohesion, an analysis of post-conflict memory must consider whose experiences are represented, whose interpretations are legitimized, and how the institutional management of the past shapes the possibilities for recognition, dialogue, and reconciliation.

Reconciliation and Politics of Memory in Rwanda

The genocide and previous atrocities in Rwanda continue to shape people's everyday lives and the country's domestic and foreign policies. The ruling Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) has adopted particular strategies to manage societal anxieties in the post-genocide period. The government seeks to restore political and economic stability, consolidate its legitimacy, and alleviate tensions among ethnic groups, perpetrators, and survivors. Given that genocide represents an extreme rupture of security and trust, reconciliation is essential to preventing renewed violence and addressing the fear and anxiety of groups compelled to coexist in the aftermath of mass violence.

Although reconciliation requires addressing both structural and psychological dimensions, the government's initiatives have predominantly emphasized psychological approaches. These include truth and reconciliation mechanisms, educational radio programs, truth-telling initiatives, and public apologies intended to alleviate the negative emotions experienced by opposing groups. In contexts of extreme violence, such mechanisms encourage perpetrators to acknowledge their crimes and seek forgiveness from victims, as illustrated by Hutu perpetrators seeking forgiveness from Tutsi survivors.

Apology and forgiveness may, however, reinforce fixed identities of perpetrator and victim. Although Tutsis were the primary targets of the 1994 genocide, victimhood and perpetration must also be examined within Rwanda's broader history of violence. As Worchel

and Coutant (2008, p. 434) observe, groups often engage in persistent disputes over which side has suffered more. Acknowledging responsibility is particularly difficult because an apology may be interpreted as an admission of perpetrator status. Nevertheless, truth, responsibility, justice, apology, and forgiveness cannot be monopolized by one group. Historical patterns of violence in Rwanda demonstrate that victimization and perpetration have extended beyond the 1994 genocide. These competing experiences generate intense sociopsychological dynamics characteristic of intractable conflicts, complicating the prospects for resolution and reconciliation (Bar-Tal, 2007, pp. 1430–1453).

Psychological reconciliation initiatives have also included sociotherapy programs designed to improve the well-being of Rwandan youth and foster reconciliation between survivors and perpetrators. Implemented by local nongovernmental organizations, churches, and international sponsors, these initiatives seek to facilitate healing, strengthen social cohesion, alleviate trauma, and enhance community resilience (Biracyaza & Habimana, 2020, pp. 1–15). Although sociotherapy contributes to long-term reconciliation, its limited scope necessitates further institutional and societal support.

The RPF's reconciliation policies initially centered on official commemorations and legal and educational reforms. In 1995, the government institutionalized national mourning and commemoration to honor victims and survivors. The National Commission for the Fight against Genocide was subsequently established in 2007. Educational radio programs, revised school curricula, monuments, memorials, museums, civil society organizations, and commemorative events were introduced to promote national reconciliation.

However, the government's psychological approach to reconciliation has been accompanied by an extensive politics of memory. The apology–forgiveness framework, in which Hutu perpetrators apologize and Tutsi survivors forgive, privileges a particular configuration of victimhood. This Tutsification of victimhood risks excluding moderate Hutus who opposed the genocide and Hutu victims of violence perpetrated by the RPF. By privileging Tutsi victimhood while marginalizing alternative experiences of suffering, the government reinforces an asymmetrical interpretation of Rwanda's history. Such selective recognition undermines inclusive justice and perpetuates perceptions of injustice, potentially reproducing the conditions that sustain intergroup tensions.

The collective designation of Hutus as perpetrators and *genocidaires* further entrenches this asymmetry by obscuring their potential victimization. Under the framework of "national unity and reconciliation," Tutsi victimhood has become politicized, while the genocide has served as a source of political legitimacy. The Rwandan political elite has mobilized both the Tutsification of victimhood and the ideology of "never again" to legitimize authoritarian practices through appeals to real or perceived threats (Thomson, 2018, p. 242).

The post-genocide state has pursued "national unity and reconciliation" as a means of reshaping Rwanda's political and social future. Through institutional practices and memory policies, the government seeks to regulate public discourse and everyday social relations. Officials promote the idea of a unified precolonial Rwandan identity and attribute genocidal violence to ethnic divisions (Thomson, 2013, p. 112). Accordingly, public expressions of ethnic divisionism and the trivialization of genocide have been criminalized (Thomson, 2013, p. 112).

Public discussion of the genocide has also been constrained by legislation, particularly the genocide ideology law (Human Rights Watch, 2008). The law's broad application to expressions deemed divisive has enabled the prosecution of conduct extending beyond the internationally recognized crime of genocide. Waldorf (2011, pp. 55–56) argues that the law is disconnected from the universally accepted definition of genocide and permits severe penalties for lesser offenses. The government also exercises substantial control over the media and public information, shaping interpretations of the genocide, the RPF's role in ending it, and the progress of reconciliation. Political opposition is similarly constrained (Reyntjens, 2006, p.

1107), while public discourse concerning government policies remains subject to significant restrictions (Jessee, 2011, pp. 287–307).

Post-conflict justice is crucial to both accountability and reconciliation. Rwanda established the National Unity and Reconciliation Commission, the National Commission for the Fight against Genocide, and the gacaca courts to advance these objectives. The National Commission for the Fight against Genocide was mandated to combat genocide ideology, conduct research, and raise public awareness. In principle, gacaca courts offered a framework for restorative justice, community-based conflict resolution, and reconciliation (Clark, 2010). In practice, however, their contribution to reconciliation at the individual level has been limited, with broader societal reconciliation remaining elusive (Clark, 2010).

As a traditional judicial mechanism for prosecuting genocide suspects, gacaca was also expected to encourage community-level apology and forgiveness. Nevertheless, the system faced substantial procedural and institutional limitations and did not fully fulfill its intended judicial functions. Participation was compulsory, and individuals could face imprisonment for failing to attend proceedings (Thomson, 2013, pp. 120–121).

The National Unity and Reconciliation Commission encouraged perpetrators to issue public apologies, survivors to forgive, and citizens to engage with Rwanda's past. It also established *ingando* camps to educate citizens and promote a unified national identity beyond ethnic classifications. The government further introduced *ndi umunyarwanda* ("I am Rwandan") as an official narrative of inclusive national identity (Grayson & Hitchcott, 2019, p. 9). Although intended to foster national cohesion, the program risks suppressing Hutu and Tutsi identities in the name of unity (Purdeková, 2020, pp. 1183–1199).

Ingando and gacaca have consequently become important sites for the institutionalization of memory politics. *Ingando* camps target diverse groups, including religious leaders, academics, students, soldiers, prisoners, former combatants, community leaders, gacaca judges, and convicted perpetrators. Their educational programs disseminate official RPF narratives of history, national unity, and reconciliation, while soldiers monitor participants (Thomson, 2011, pp. 311–339). The curricula emphasize unity, reconciliation, the failures of the former genocidal regime, and the purportedly democratic characteristics of the current government (Mgbako, 2005, p. 209). Together with commemorations, civil society organizations, and local institutions, these initiatives extend state influence over collective memory and everyday social life.

Nevertheless, oppressive state policies, political indoctrination in *ingando* camps, and restrictions on political opposition and the press undermine the reconciliation mechanisms established by the government (Amnesty International, 2004; Human Rights Watch, 2003). Official accounts frequently emphasize the achievements of these initiatives while overlooking their limitations. Rather than establishing the foundations for sustainable reconciliation, such practices risk deepening societal divisions and perpetuating latent tensions.

The government's reconciliation initiatives have attracted substantial criticism, including allegations of human rights violations within Rwanda and across the region. Rather than resolving historical grievances, state-led reconciliation has increasingly been associated with the consolidation of official narratives, political polarization, and heightened fear and anxiety. Memory politics has thus become a central instrument through which the government seeks to manage post-conflict society.

Rwanda's political history reflects a transition between successive authoritarian regimes, and the current government has continued this pattern. Political authorities restrict freedom of expression, constrain the media and civil society, and exercise considerable influence over political parties and electoral processes (Longman, 2011, pp. 26–27). Justified through the language of economic development, national unity, and reconciliation, these restrictions reinforce authoritarian governance and encourage self-censorship.

Rwanda's historical legacies continue to shape contemporary political tensions. Competing interpretations of the precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial periods remain deeply contested. Hutu narratives often portray the precolonial and colonial periods as characterized by oppression and Tutsi monarchical dominance, while interpreting independence and Hutu-led postcolonial governance as periods of liberation. Tutsi narratives frequently reverse these interpretations (Eltringham, 2004, pp. 147–179; Jessee, 2011, pp. 237–254).

Throughout Rwanda's history, political elites have centralized historical representation and mobilized competing ethnic identities in ways that contributed to polarization, violence, and genocide. These processes positioned different groups as both perpetrators and victims at various historical moments. The post-genocide government continues to privilege its official interpretation of history, producing competing understandings of Rwanda's past and present. By reproducing rather than critically addressing earlier patterns of historical exclusion, the government's memory politics threatens long-term political stability and intensifies societal tensions.

Debates concerning Rwandan ethnicity remain divided between scholars who interpret Hutu and Tutsi distinctions primarily through social stratification and colonial political construction and those who regard them as ethnic identities (Eltringham, 2004, pp. 1–33). Although the government seeks to overcome ethnic divisions by suppressing ethnic identification, the elimination of ethnic references does not necessarily eliminate ethnic belonging. Instead, it may render such identities less visible without diminishing their significance. As Sommers and McClintock (2003, p. 41) argue, "Limiting talk about ethnicity does not eradicate its potency, it might just send ethnic involvement underground."

The removal of ethnic references from public discourse is intended to promote national unity, establish a common identity, and overcome the legacy of ethnic violence. However, these policies may encourage self-silencing among individuals who continue to identify with their ethnic communities. The suppression of ethnic identities and the imposition of ethnic amnesia consequently constitute significant obstacles to reconciliation (Lemarchand, 2009, p. 109). A de-ethnicized, victim-centered collective memory cannot, on its own, facilitate social healing (Lemarchand, 2009, p. 103). Suppressing ethnic expression and imposing the RPF's historical narrative may instead generate resentment and undermine the legitimacy of reconciliation policies. Sustainable reconciliation therefore requires recognition of victims across social groups without denying the genocide against the Tutsi or obscuring individual criminal responsibility.

State authorities exercise considerable control over public memory and commemorative practices, beginning with the first official annual commemoration in 1995. Since then, state-organized commemorations have shaped how the genocide is publicly remembered. Although Hutu and Tutsi civilians were killed in different episodes of violence, official memorial practices establish particular boundaries between recognized victims, survivors, and perpetrators. Constitutional and legal representations of the genocide have further privileged the recognition of Tutsi victimhood (Thomson, 2013, p. 117). The exclusion of Hutu victims of RPF violence and the attribution of collective responsibility to Hutus, rather than individual criminal accountability, undermine both justice and the prospects for long-term reconciliation.

The government also maintains a hegemonic position in public mourning. Monuments and museums institutionalize a state-centered commemorative narrative that foregrounds Tutsi victimhood and reinforces the political legitimacy of the government. Citizens are frequently expected to participate in memorial ceremonies, even when these practices do not reflect their personal preferences. Some genocide survivors have criticized official commemorations while attending because participation is effectively obligatory (Mannergren Selimovic, 2020, p. 136). The institutionalization of memory politics extends to the National Unity and Reconciliation Commission, established in 1999, whose activities include monitoring the implementation of reconciliation policies in rural communities (Thomson, 2013, p. 119).

Through official mourning and commemorative practices, the government seeks to consolidate its legitimacy. Yet state control cannot guarantee the production of a singular historical narrative that is accepted by the entire population. Extensive local surveillance and a pervasive culture of obedience may render dissent less visible without resolving underlying grievances, thereby constraining the prospects for meaningful reconciliation.

States simultaneously produce and conceal collective traumas, while resistance to official commemorative narratives can constitute a form of resistance to sovereign power (Edkins, 2003, p. xv). In Rwanda, the government's commitment to national unity and reconciliation has institutionalized memory politics as a mechanism of social control, contributing to public silence, anxiety, and tensions between citizens, officials, and local authorities. Burnet (2012) describes this phenomenon as "amplified silence." Through memorials, monuments, schools, and civil society institutions, the government selectively foregrounds certain experiences of violence while marginalizing others. Although official remembrance is expected to facilitate closure and address collective trauma, Rwanda's commemorative practices privilege one category of victimhood while rendering other experiences less visible. Consequently, collective memory remains politically contested, as those in power retain the capacity to revise historical narratives and redefine the meaning of past violence.

The government has also reinforced its political project through symbolic transformation. Rwanda's new national flag, anthem, and other national symbols represent the aspiration to establish a unified national identity. These symbols, together with the country's extensive administrative infrastructure, extend state policies into local communities. From provincial and district authorities to sectors, cells, villages, and households, local administrative structures implement central policies while regulating aspects of everyday life, including agriculture, health, customs, and trade (Thomson, 2013, p. 121). These mechanisms reinforce the state's presence in daily life and sustain practices of surveillance and political compliance.

The government's top-down reconciliation policies and official historical narratives have encouraged both self-censorship and less visible forms of resistance. As in other authoritarian contexts, citizens may resist political authority subtly and indirectly, including when members of both Hutu and Tutsi communities regard state policies as unjust or illegitimate (Thomson, 2013, p. 186). Thomson (2013, pp. 127–159) identifies three forms of everyday resistance: "staying on the sidelines," "irreverent compliance," and "withdrawn muteness." Similarly, some genocide survivors prefer to mourn privately rather than participate in state-organized commemorations (Ibreck, 2010, pp. 330–343). These forms of withdrawal and resistance indicate that official reconciliation policies have not necessarily resolved the underlying tensions between communities and the state.

Reconciliation in Rwanda therefore remains a complex and protracted process. Reconciling groups that must continue to coexist within a single political community presents particularly intractable challenges (Mitchell, 2014, p. 271). By privileging one category of victimhood, the government's memory politics risks reinforcing feelings of injustice, mistrust, and resentment among Hutus. Under such conditions, even apologies, assistance, and compensation may be interpreted negatively, further aggravating intergroup tensions. Psychological reconciliation initiatives can consequently produce counterproductive outcomes when they operate within an exclusionary political framework. Rather than facilitating genuine social integration, state-led reconciliation has sought to consolidate a unified Rwandan identity through a selective narrative of victimhood. These practices ultimately limit the prospects for inclusive, sustainable reconciliation.

Conclusion

Conflicts in Rwanda have historically been rooted in material concerns, including access to cultivable land, water, and shelter within a small territory characterized by high population density. Relations between the Tutsi minority and Hutu majority have been marked by recurring patterns and cycles of violence. The 1994 genocide, however, represented one of the most extreme episodes of violence in the country's history. Examining these conflicts is

essential not only to understanding their underlying causes but also to preventing renewed cycles of violence within Rwanda and the wider region. In the aftermath of genocide, Rwanda urgently requires effective conflict resolution and reconciliation processes that address the substantive grievances, needs, and underlying causes of conflict.

Reconciliation entails mutual acceptance, the cultivation of constructive attitudes and practices, and the establishment of institutions capable of delivering justice, uncovering the truth, acknowledging past harms, rebuilding trust, and bringing adversarial groups together. Alongside structural approaches, conflict resolution and reconciliation frameworks emphasize apology and forgiveness, as well as the disclosure of historical truths, as mechanisms for enabling post-conflict societies to coexist peacefully. Integrating these psychological approaches into school curricula, judicial institutions, and collective memory practices is particularly important, as such efforts may contribute to meaningful reconciliation and help break cycles of violence.

In the post-conflict period, the Rwandan government introduced and promoted policies under the banner of "national unity and reconciliation." Nevertheless, the country continues to experience a repressive political environment characterized by structural mechanisms of social control that extend into the everyday lives of Rwandans. In the name of national unity and reconciliation, government officials mobilize collective memory to advance their vision of the political community. Public discussion of ethnic identities is strongly discouraged, while legislation criminalizes vaguely defined offenses related to divisionism and genocide ideology. These practices ultimately serve to consolidate the government's political power.

Although reconciliation is intended to foster a unified Rwandan identity that transcends historical ethnic divisions, ethnicity continues to shape the ideological foundations of political life. As Guichaoua (2015, p. 293) observes, "with one party denying genocide and the other demonizing the genocidal regime and the previous two Hutu dominated republics," competing historical narratives remain deeply entrenched. Genocide and ethnic identities consequently remain subjects of political contestation. However, establishing a unified national identity should not take precedence over the recognition of diverse historical experiences in the pursuit of long-term reconciliation. Rather than imposing a singular identity or collective memory, reconciliation requires the sensitive and inclusive recognition of victims across different groups.

The government's reconciliation agenda has increasingly instrumentalized the politics of memory as a means of maintaining political power through repressive practices. This strategy encompasses the politicization of genocide, the privileging of Tutsi victimhood, the institutionalization of official historical narratives, state-sponsored commemorations, *ingando* reeducation camps, *gacaca* courts, and local administrative institutions. These practices have contributed to self-censorship and heightened anxiety and tensions among competing groups. Suppressing ethnic identities and selectively representing the past cannot, in themselves, establish national unity, facilitate reconciliation, or promote social healing. Instead, such practices risk perpetuating intergroup resentment and reinforcing existing divisions.

The suppression of ethnic identities and the limitations inherent in the existing reconciliation process have themselves become significant obstacles to reconciliation. The politics of memory, national unity policies, and localized systems of social control constrain the capacity and willingness of individuals to reconcile with their neighbors and former adversaries. Because the government predominantly recognizes Tutsis as victims of the genocide, Hutus may be reluctant to articulate their experiences and grievances because of the stigma associated with genocide, the fear of social exclusion, or concerns about state repression. Restricting the expression of grievances and suppressing collective identities consequently narrow the possibilities for meaningful reconciliation.

Resistance to authoritarian governance and to local authorities' attempts to regulate everyday life remains limited and often takes subtle forms. This limited resistance operates within a historical context characterized by a culture of obedience and an extensive system of

state surveillance that reaches into local communities and even households. However, the Rwandan government cannot establish a genuinely shared collective memory through authoritarian institutions and coercive practices. On the contrary, national unity and reconciliation policies implemented without an inclusive and substantive reconciliation process risk intensifying intergroup anxieties and potentially generating renewed cycles of violence. Although collective remembrance, monuments, and commemorative practices are important components of peacebuilding, the government appears to approach reconciliation primarily through the selective construction, privileging, and exclusion of particular memories of conflict and the past.

The applicability of reconciliation frameworks to the Rwandan case is particularly complex. Attempts to rigidly distinguish between victims and perpetrators or to prescribe relationships between apology and forgiveness may generate additional sources of tension. Taking economic and political factors into account, reconciliation is more likely to advance through bottom-up initiatives that address collective fears and concerns about in-group security than through exclusively top-down, state-led interventions. The continuing memory regime also has implications for security within Rwanda and beyond its borders. Furthermore, existing policies reproduce perceptions of injustice, deepen social divisions, and intensify polarization both within Rwanda and across Central Africa. Ultimately, sustainable reconciliation and peacebuilding cannot be achieved where perceptions of injustice, the exclusion of certain victims, the suppression of identities, and restrictions on public expression remain entrenched.

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