

# ALC COVID-19 RESEARCH

OP-ED SERIES – VOL.4 ISSUE: 4

JULY 24, 2020

---

## COVID-19 AND COLLECTIVE REMEMBERING IN RWANDA: 'E- MOURNING', 'E-COMMEMORATION' AND THE LIMITS OF TECHNOLOGY

Eric Sibomana

### IN SUMMARY

- The COVID-19 crisis has affected Rwanda's annual genocide commemoration events with a shift from physical to technology-driven commemoration, amongst other changes to the usual schema.
- While the individual mourner experienced emotional loss, the Rwandan government lacked space to pass on political messages, such as those on the role of the international community in Rwanda's post-genocide reconstruction.
- Changes have significant implications for the psychosocial health and the socio-cultural and spiritual wellbeing of Rwandans, which saw toll-free mental health hotlines being made available.
- The 'digitization' of remembrance activities, or 'E-Commemoration', exposed the technology gaps between rural and urban areas, implying an accompanying emotional gap among mourners that raises questions about

what would constitute inclusive commemoration for such a society when technology becomes essential.

Conventionally, the Republic of Rwanda and the international community [commemorate the 1994 genocide](#) annually, and the entire remembrance extends from [7 April to mid- July](#) every year. It is a one-hundred-day duration symbolizing the period that the violence lasted. The 7<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> April is a period dedicated to regular commemorative activities, such as a re-burial of newly exhumed victims, visits to memorials and sites of massacres, attendance at lecture sessions in different settings, to name a few. The COVID-19 crisis, however, has affected the commemoration events this year. Adjustments made by the government resulted, for example, in a shift from physical to technology-driven commemoration. This transition exposes the disparity between mourners and mourning and remembering in the rural and urban areas. This 'memorial gap' affects individuals and communities and hinders some of the nation's reconstruction processes.

Under usual circumstances, the topics covered during lecture sessions highlight the fabric uniting a burly Rwandan community and how divisive ideologies were implanted in the lead up to the genocide. Parallel with this, the lectures were intended to instill bravery in the populace, where the liberation war serves as a didactic tool that is offered to the youth. On an inaugural day, 7<sup>th</sup> April, Rwandans assemble to attend the kick-off ceremonies at designated administrative centers and the night vigil at all sites of commemoration. From 14<sup>th</sup> April to July is the time for institutions – public and private – to commemorate separately with the public. These institutions remain duty-bound to choose a convenient date for a special remembrance for their staff who were victims of the genocide. Like other commemorative activities, these events demand the physical attendance of current staff members, families and friends of the victims, and distinct invitees. The National Commission for the Fight against the Genocide (CNLG) , the IBUGA- Umbrella association of Survivors, the National Army, and the National Police – [delegate well-trained personnel to offer a talk.](#)

The onset of COVID-19 has triggered (or paralleled) shifts and changes in the way and manner commemorations are done in Rwanda. The adjustments

made during the 26<sup>th</sup> commemoration indicate the government's difficult balancing act between protecting the health of the citizenry and remembering the past (memorial priorities). Ultimately, the scale was tipped in favor of the former, notwithstanding strong commitments, still, for the memorials. Admittedly, some of the changes do show innovation and adaptation, still they paradoxically undercut the psychosocial, socio-cultural, and symbolic importance, including healing, associated with orthodox forms of remembering and commemoration in Rwanda.

In seeking to balance the commemoration events with mitigating COVID-19, one of the noticeable changes by the government of Rwanda was to amend the usual commemoration schema. For instance, a [communiqué](#) announcing adjustment to the archetypal commemoration format was passed on in the words of the Executive Secretary of the National Commission for the Fight against Genocide (CNLG) - Dr. Jean Damascène Bizimana: "The official opening of commemoration ceremonies at district levels on April 7 will not take place. All citizens will participate in the commemoration from their homes using TV, radio, and social media [...]". This was also informed by the cabinet's decision to extend the lockdown period.

A second shift in collective remembering was to cancel or reduce physical participation and events in Rwanda. Meetings and ceremonies requiring physical contact and ensembles of people were prohibited and replaced by video conferencing. Similarly, [the East African Community \(EAC\) banned physical events](#) at its headquarters while in previous years, multitudes gathered to join the Rwandan community in commemorative activities. Instead of delegating an expert member of staff to offer lectures at commemorative sites, the CNLG committed to issuing a daily write-up to help mourners catch up with the aired materials. However well-intentioned the initiative is, it remains unclear how effective the distribution and accessibility of these materials are. The COVID-19 crisis also brings to light the inadequacies of this approach in a society such as Rwanda or elsewhere in Africa where the reading culture is not prevalent; and is eclipsed by [oral tradition as a means of communication](#).

Taking steps like the ones implemented at the EAC headquarters, the Government of Rwanda reduced the number of participants at the inaugural

event to 10 people, a stark contrast to the pre-COVID-19 open-to-all norm. Unfortunately, this decision did not favor part of the community by limiting attendance. The pandemic deprived mourners of some commemorative rights, such as the sharing of testimonies of genocide survivor experience, a practice that steers [emotional healing and social reconciliation](#). Mourners were not able to express their bereavement in the way they would usually have wanted and deemed culturally appropriate.

A third noticeable shift in approach to commemoration of the genocide in Rwanda in 2020 was brevity of speeches and events in ways that cuts off the space to revisit old topics, highlight new themes, and renew commitments to a New Rwanda. While the individual mourner experienced emotional loss, the government lacked space to pass on political messages, such as those on the role of the international community in Rwanda's post-genocide reconstruction. The [26<sup>th</sup> commemoration inaugural speech](#) at the Kigali Genocide Memorial Centre was too brief to further explore remembrance topics. Also, COVID-19 prompted changes cast a shadow on political discourses at commemoration spots. Luminaries such as the Belgian Prime Minister, Guy Verhofstadt, in the year 2000 used the commemoration ceremony as [a platform to apologize](#) for the role played by the international community. In the context of COVID-19, such opportunities for members of the international community (diplomatic corps) to self-introspect and condole with Rwandans were lost.

Fourth, the peculiarities of COVID-19, specifically the national lockdown, rendered memorials inaccessible as many could not travel. Orthodox cultural practices and rituals associated with collective memory, mourning and remembrance such as visits to gravesides and the laying wreath to reconnect with departed souls were also not possible. This has significant implications for the psychosocial health and the socio-cultural and spiritual wellbeing of Rwandans. To address this, IBUKA provided [toll-free mental health hotlines](#) to serve survivors dealing with trauma but survivors still had to grapple with access to counseling services.

The fifth and perhaps the most important shift in commemoration practices in 2020 was the 'digitization' of remembrance activities, the so-called 'E-Commemoration', as part of the mitigation strategies against COVID-19. The electronic commemoration involves condolence messages and testimonies

being relayed via social media platforms, with WhatsApp and YouTube being the most preferred. The transition from physical to E-commemoration exposes and heightens the technology gaps (inequality) between rural and urban areas, with mourners in the rural areas having little or no access to technology. The technology gap is real for many African societies where the uptake of technology and the infrastructure is of a larger scale in urban compared to the rural areas. Does this imply an emotional gap among mourners, especially those in rural areas? Moreover, it raises questions about what would constitute inclusive commemoration for such a society when technology remains the sole alternative?

Overall, commemorating the genocide amidst the COVID-19 has made technology a new icon of the memorialization of atrocities, and perhaps an essential tool of social change. The recourse to E-Commemoration exposes and sharpens the digital inequality between urban and rural areas broadly, and in the context of the 26<sup>th</sup> anniversary in Rwanda. As the obligation to protect citizens from atrocities and plagues are the primary obligations of to the state, technology allows the Government of Rwanda the opportunity to still commemorate the genocide without compromising public health and safety. This could and does represent a new approach in collective memorials as seen in funeral practices for victims of COVID-19 across the globe. However, the recourse to 'E-Mourning', 'E-Memorials', and 'E-Commemoration' surely has its psychosocial, socio-cultural, and perhaps political opportunity costs.

\* **Eric Sibomana** is a Research Associate of the African Leadership Centre. He has an MA in Genocide Studies and Prevention

Email: [sibomanakany@gmail.com](mailto:sibomanakany@gmail.com)