



Citation for published version:

Purdeková, A 2024, 'Forgetting Atrocity in East Africa', *Current History*, vol. 123, no. 853, pp. 169-174.
<https://doi.org/10.1525/curh.2024.123.853.169>

DOI:

[10.1525/curh.2024.123.853.169](https://doi.org/10.1525/curh.2024.123.853.169)

Publication date:

2024

Document Version

Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication](#)

University of Bath

Alternative formats

If you require this document in an alternative format, please contact:
openaccess@bath.ac.uk

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Forgetting Atrocity in East Africa

By Andrea Purdeková

The Many Shapes of Silence

Our era is often described as one embracing memory and commemoration of civilian atrocities. Some have even dubbed it memorial mania. Scholarly works have equally concentrated on understanding and critiquing the rush to commemorate atrocity. Expansive work on Holocaust sites, memorials and museums or more recently, sites of transnational terrorism such as Ground Zero dominate work on memory. Yet this trend towards memorialisation is in fact relatively recent and obscures how in many countries around the world today, memories of violence are being systematically erased.

The impetus to forget is intimately tied to transitional contexts emerging from atrocity. Memory in deeply divided societies emerging from mass violence, and in context of regimes that not only inherit but might have also contributed to violence, is a potentially threatening force, one to carefully govern, police and, at times, suppress. We thus need to move beyond memory as ‘making the past present’ to a more in-depth understanding of absent pasts, and the implications of these labours of the negative.

We need to ask questions such as: How is forgetting governed in the wake of mass violence? Do different regimes forget violence in distinct ways? Just like commemoration, forgetting in the wake of violence takes many different forms. There is no one relation between memory and power. Different regimes do indeed forget differently depending on the type of war-to-peace transition – the way in which violence ended – as well as on the type of violence, its complexity, and its political charge. Contemporary cases of African states affected by mass conflict show us the variegated struggles around memory and forgetting especially well.

Victor’s Memory

Rwanda’s 1994 genocide targeting the Tutsi minority has shocked the conscience of the world. Between 500,000-1 million people have lost their lives over the period of three months between April and July 1994. Rwanda’s post-genocide elites have embraced commemoration of the genocide and have ever since backed an intensive form of memorialisation, perhaps even the most intense on the continent.

In 2015, the National Commission for the Fight Against Genocide (CNLG) calculated that there were no less than 234 genocide memorial sites and 115 graves in Rwanda commemorating the genocide. The Gisozi genocide memorial in the capital Kigali is the most well-known and visited memorial museum and a mass grave. But multiple other memorial sites dot Rwanda, including churches such as those of Nyamata and Ntarama or schools preserved as sites of actual genocidal violence. The annual remembrance period known as *Kwibuka* (Remember) officially lasts for months and includes commemorative ceremonies, speeches and reburials. Genocide laws have been promulgated in Rwanda, which govern the memory of genocide. A rich archive of trial proceedings from the International Criminal

Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) and the thousands of local *gacaca* courts exist as a bank of memory of the 1994 genocide.

But Rwanda's is also a story of systematic and state-enforced forgetting. While the genocide against the Tutsi is commemorated, other civilian violence of the 1990s and beyond is not. Rwanda's peace transition path is one where victorious insurgents took over power in the wake of a devastating genocide and consolidated an authoritarian regime, with the Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF) transforming from a rebel group to a hegemonic political party. Rwanda's new elites have established a repressive peace and thus we must look at the political implication of victory for memory.

In post-genocide Rwanda, what we see is a victor's peace translated into victor's memory. Commemoration is tightly policed around a dominant narrative, with some civilian violence remembered, while other actively repressed. In particular, violence perpetrated by the party in power – the RPF – is not officially acknowledged or commemorated, and this includes violence against the Hutu population during the civil war (1990-1994), during and in the aftermath of genocide, during the counter-insurgency in the Northwest of Rwanda (1997-1998) and in the new government's military campaigns in the neighbouring DRC. Even in the case of the genocide, the memory of Hutu victims, Twa victims and those of mixed Tutsi-Hutu heritage is not part of the official transcript.

Against the hundreds of designated sites of memory then, there are myriad of sites of violence that have been obliterated or rectified – returned to prior use without mark or ceremony. The hill of Kibeho in southern Rwanda is one such example. This was a site of an internally displaced persons (IDP) camp during the civil war and genocide, where Hutu fleeing the advance of the RPF concentrated. After the RPF took over power and ended the genocide, the newly established government decided to forcibly close the camp. It wanted people to return to their homes and to neutralise the genocidaires that were hiding in the midst of the displaced. The camp population was nestled between the former genocidaires' pressures not to leave and the army's orders to vacate the area. In the end, the army decided to use violence to break the resistance and disperse the camp's inhabitants, with the result of about 4,000 people killed at the hands of the government forces. Despite the vast loss of life at this site, today there is no mark or memorial for the victims and there is no sign anywhere of any kind that a massacre took place here. Other such sites dot Rwanda.

But RPF-era violence and its uncommemorated sites reach much beyond Rwanda, making memory and forgetting a truly transnational issue. In the wake of genocide, more than 2 million Hutu fled Rwanda in what was a rapid and massive exodus. The majority settled in refugee camps on the Zaire-Rwanda border, which the new government in Rwanda branded as security threats. With the help of a local Zairian armed group, the AFDL, the RPF has decided to destroy the camps and has launched military attacks on these in late 1996. The AFDL and RPA jointly attacked Hutu refugee camps and settlements across eastern Zaire and then pursued the remaining refugees fleeing into the interior of Zaire, perpetrating massacres across large swathes of Eastern DRC. The report of a UN joint mission referred to more than 134 sites where atrocities had been committed in Zaire.

Breaching the silences around memory is a costly affair. Raising the issue of RPF-perpetrated violence brings on accusations of genocide negationism, genocide minimisation and can classify under the punishable offence of genocide ideology. More broadly, veering from the official line means incurring repressive sanctions including harassment, disappearance,

imprisonment, torture and assassination. The story of the Rwandan gospel singer Kizito Mihigo is a case in point. As a Tutsi survivor of genocide and a long-time supporter of the ruling party, Mihigo thought himself well positioned to breach the sensitive topic of Hutu victimhood. In a 2014 song entitled 'The Meaning of Death,' Mihigo raised the importance of a more inclusive recognition of violence, beyond the genocide. Shortly after the song's release, Mihigo was arrested on sedition charges and accused of conspiracy against the government and an attempt to aid a terrorist group abroad. In 2020, Mihigo died in detention.

An Alliance of Oblivion

Rwanda's neighbour Burundi is often dubbed its false twin – some of its shared characteristics might mislead when analysing its political history and its complex dynamics of conflict. Burundi has gone through cycles of mass violence and displacement since its independence. In 1972, the systematic massacres perpetrated against the Hutu majority were proclaimed as genocide by the French academic René Lemarchand and more than a hundred-fifty thousand Burundians fled abroad. In the early 1990s, assassination of the first democratically-elected Hutu president and massacres of the Tutsi have escalated to a full-fledged civil war. Yet despite a long history of mass atrocity, no single person has been put on trial for perpetration of political violence in Burundi.

Since the gradual end of Burundi's civil war between 2003 and 2008, Burundi has been at relative peace (until the political turmoil, mass protests and violent repression of 2015). The end of the war nonetheless did not bring with it a strong commitment to memory processes. Despite the clear provisions of the Arusha Peace Accords calling for the establishment of a National Truth and Reconciliation Commission, an International Criminal Tribunal, a national monument in memory of all victims, and a comprehensive mapping of mass graves, the transitional justice in the country has been all but stalled for more than a decade and remains fraught today.

The path to forgetting in Burundi differs from that of Rwanda. In contrast to Rwanda's rebel victory, Burundi's war-to-peace transition took the form of a negotiated settlement - an intricate consociational power-sharing deal. The power sharing architecture was built around core pillars such as elite cooperation, sharing of power among the ethnic groups, and a minority veto. Many consider Burundi's consociationalism a success of post-war peacebuilding and an example of successful ethnic pacification.

While the power-sharing aspects of the Burundi peace deal were implemented, the provisions around transitional justice and memory were not. In stark contrast to the militant activism around memory and its boundaries in Rwanda, Burundi's post-war memory regime was defined by purposeful inaction and stalling. This is because all key parties to power sharing have perpetrated abuses in the past. They shared incentive to avoid memory and commemoration. The memory regime in Burundi after the war can thus be best defined as a coalition of oblivion. This differs from active suppression and partial memory in Rwanda and rather represents purposeful inaction and erasures of memory through wilful negligence.

Several thousand mass graves dot Burundi and these have been systematically left unmapped for decades. The negligence has created forms of symbolic violence – victims' remains have often been left in unmarked graves, without proper acknowledgment, ceremony or reburial. The decades of inaction have led to varied forms of memory erosion. New development projects have threatened to either displace and remove, or else dispose of unmarked and

unearthed remains. This has been the case in the small settlement of Kivyuka in the north of Burundi where a large mass grave dating to the civil war was partially unearthed during road construction. The unearthed remains were unceremoniously wrapped and stored in an administrative office, with no mark or ceremony and no certain future for the remains. In another case, remains were unearthed on a hill in the city of Gitega – Burundi’s new capital – during construction of a new urban quarter. The remains were again gathered and disposed of.

Even in localities where mass violence is marked by a memorial, memory is not safe. In an informal settlement of Bugendana in the centre of the country, inhabitants were consumed with worry about the government’s plans to redevelop the site into a new airport. The government threatened to remove them from the locality and, similarly, threatened to displace and remove their lost loved ones. Many suspected that political motives around impunity were behind the threat to the physical site and the threat of memory erasure. It was allegedly the CNDD-FDD rebels, now the dominant party in power, that perpetrated a massacre at the site during the civil war. The redevelopment of the site was a way to remove a reminder of the ruling party’s own implication in violence.

Interestingly, Burundi demonstrates that when the nature of the political regime changes, so does its approach to memory. With an increased political dominance of the CNDD-FDD party, we have a setting more conducive to hegemonic memory rather than connivance in oblivion. Indeed, in 2014, just before the contested election and political crisis of 2015 that saw further concentration of power in the hands of the dominant party, we also saw an emergence of a politicised Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in Burundi.

The TRC is widely perceived as an institution over which the dominant party retains control – through the composition of the commissioners, and the mandate and work of the commission itself. The TRC has picked up activity in 2019 and has since uncovered and mapped thousands of mass graves in Burundi. It has also collected tens of thousands of witness testimonies. However, the TRC has remained selective in its approach. It has channelled attention to crimes such as the 1972 genocidal massacres of the Hutu, and away from crimes where the CNDD-FDD is itself implicated, whether during the civil war or indeed during the 2015 third term crisis. In Burundi then, a blanket official forgetting has given in to a more selective one.

Triumphalist Amnesia

Kenya offers a useful contrast to the preceding two countries and a distinct pathway to forgetting. The violence that Kenya has faced in the past decade differs from the genocide in Rwanda or civil war in Burundi – it is a transnational, regionally-constituted confrontation with an Islamist group Al-Shabaab, which has perpetrated sporadic but systematic violent attacks in public spaces in Kenya. The contrast also appears at the level of regime. Kenya is a non-transitional context and it is a democracy, contrasting starkly with the hegemonic authoritarianism in Rwanda. Silence thus does not emerge as a result of repression, as in Rwanda, or a mutual pact of inaction by former perpetrators now in power, as in Burundi. Nonetheless, there is still a purposeful choice of non-remembrance at the sites of Al-Shabaab violence in Kenya. Silence in this case is presented as a show of resilience in the face of terror.

Kenya holds a key role in East Africa's confrontation with the militant salafi-jihadi group Al-Shabaab (AS). Since the rise of the group in Somalia in the early 2000s, it has gone through various transformations, gradually increasing its regional reach. After a formidable rise and domination of large swathes of South-Central Somalia in late 2000s, Al-Shabaab was pushed back by Ethiopian forces, the Somali government and later held in check by a regional African Union force AMISOM. The group was nonetheless successful in establishing regional cells and staged hundreds of attacks, most frequently in Somalia and in Kenya where it exploited local grievances. Kenya's invasion in Somalia in 2011 and counterterrorism initiatives invited blowback and further Al-Shabaab retaliation. Over time, Kenya has emerged as a key partner in US and UK global counterterrorist initiatives, both as a base of international operations but also as one of the top recipient of US counterterrorism funding. Large international resources were invested both in enforcement-centred, hard security infrastructure at home, increasing the state's military and surveillance capabilities, and in 'soft,' population-focused security measures, attempting to engage populations directly in the War on Terror via investment in civil society organisations, community policing, infrastructure projects, among other areas of development. It is hence against this backdrop of multi-level securitisation of public space in Kenya that memory of the violence must be seen.

The confrontation with Al-Shabaab in Kenya and Somalia has over the past decade produced its own landscape of sites of violence, from hotels to schools, shopping malls to intersections. The confrontation does not simply encompass the spectacle of Al-Shabaab's violent attacks against civilians but equally the violence of disappearance and detention in government's own counter-terror measures. What joins all these instances is a public silence on the past. These sites of violence are returned to prior use without mark or much ceremony after a period of closure. These are spaces where people are asked to perform defiance by revisiting them as customers and reinhabit them as employees. Kenya's silence is then best understood as a triumphalist amnesia – silence directly co-opted as a counter-terror tool. Memory is presented as vulnerability, amnesia as a sign of strength and resolve to combat terror. Silence is thus securitised, and this translates to the treatment of the physical sites of Al-Shabaab terror.

One of the most emblematic and impactful sites of Al-Shabaab violence is the Westgate Mall in Nairobi. The attack of September 21, 2013 claimed the lives of 71 people and it took days for the Kenyan security services to neutralise the attackers. The mall was closed to the public for two years, before being reopened again in 2015. The mall has been thoroughly renovated and all traces of violence have been erased. The walls have been plastered, bullet holes filled, shattered glass replaced, new escalators put in, the collapsed part of the building was reconstructed. The mall was opened for business as usual. There is absolutely no sign of a violence amidst the glitzy interiors, and no memorial inscriptions. While for some visitors and survivors this amnesia represents triumphalism, for many other Kenyans it represents an inappropriate use of a space of violence. The danger of an active suppression of memory is the potentially negative effects on survivors, on the public processing of a traumatic past, and ultimately, on conflict resolution.

Indeed, the material reconstruction of the mall and other sites of violence shows a distinctly heavy-handed and hard security approach to Al-Shabaab violence, rather than a deeper engagement with conflict resolution revolving around acknowledgment, reflection and political solutions addressing underlying grievances. When the Westgate Mall re-opened, it was clear that a significant fortification took place with a multiplicity of security measures

put in place. The mall purchased state-of-the-art security technology, including explosives detectors, luggage X-rays, scanners to check under cars, bollards to prevent car bombs and bullet proof guard towers. A private Israeli security firm was put in charge of security, bolstering personnel, presence and surveillance. Importantly, the security implications of the Westgate attack reached much beyond the Mall itself, giving rise to a whole security industry and securitisation of public space more broadly.

Other re-opened sites of violence, such as that of Garissa University College in the north of the country, showed similar approach to fortification and securitisation of space. The grounds of the college were witness to a horrific Al-Shabaab attack in April 2015 that claimed 148 student lives. The university was closed for nine months before being reopened by the government without any mark or major ceremony, though it was renovated, repainted, and importantly, fortified. The gate to the university premises that used to be open in the past has been closed and is manned by armed police. There is a new administrative police post headed by a chief inspector, a perimeter wall fitted with razor wire and a 24-hour CCTV. Three watchtowers are manned by armed security men. No one is allowed in without either an ID or permit issued by local authorities. Just as in the case of Westgate, a defensive security response in the form of fortification dominated over measures focused on transformation of core conflict drivers.

Informal Commemoration

The active forgetting of atrocity is a political process that assumes different forms: repressive memory in Rwanda, deadlocked memory in Burundi, and active non-memory in Kenya. The degrees and nature of silence vary. What nonetheless joins these distinct regimes of memory and forgetting is the underlying driver - the attempt at pacifications of memory by governments in power. The attempt is to quieten potentially divisive and explosive pasts and to render them non-threatening, either from the viewpoint of non-recurrence of conflict or else regime stability and impunity for those in power.

In the face of official silence at the level of government and public space, communities, families and individuals have found multiple ways to commemorate informally and in private. Civil society actors have often stepped in to fill the memory void.

In Kenya, diverse forms of informal and private commemoration take place, at home, in local churches and shrines, and in public spaces online and offline. Though no monument or plaque commemorates the victims at Westgate Mall itself, Kenyans have pulled resources together to design and erect a monument to the attack in another location. A civic organization Sukuma Twende Group has raised money from donations and put up the Amani memorial garden and monument in the tranquil expanse of the Karura forest at the outskirts of Nairobi. Vigils, walks, prayer groups, talks and movies have also been organized by private citizens and civil society organization annually to remember the Westgate attacks. In Kenya's northern town of Garissa, a group of activists have organized a sleep-in in the dormitories of the school where the attack took place in order to symbolically reclaim the space. A group of private citizens here too raised funds and put up a monument listing names of victims in a memorial garden on the premises of the school. Even in the press, every year an editorial is penned on forgetting, a peculiar form of annual commemoration by discussing its gaping absence.

In Burundi too, in the face of a deadlocked transitional justice after the civil war, people found different ways to commemorate, local and informal. Informal commemoration at local levels has taken many forms, from processions, prayers, laying of flowers, debates, festivals, theatre performances, memorial inscriptions and graveyards to informal narratives circulated online and offline. Civic organisations are especially active. The organization range from small community-based groups such as ASRPDH/Kivyuka to some with national reach and based primarily in Bujumbura such as The Conflict Alert and Prevention Centre (CENAP) to non-governmental organisations of international scope such as the Search for Common Ground (SFCG). All of these work with and for victims and on different issues relating to memory of violence. And despite the change of guard at the helm of politics, old memorials established under different regimes still survive. A case in point is the Bugendana memorial graveyard introduced above. The fact that this local space of memory openly threatening to the ruling party has been preserved showcases the relative power of people in local communities to curate memory, even if this has been under attack and thus vulnerable to erasure.

This is certainly more than could ever be done in Rwanda. No journalist or artist, or indeed community group or NGO would risk to openly commemorate or put up memorials in honor of victims of RPF crimes. This topic is all but taboo in Rwanda and its breach is punishable by lengthy prison sentences. But even in this much more constrained and policed space of memory, people find ways to commemorate. Their memory labours are more private. Their inscriptions, dedicated events and memorials are not openly proclaimed as such. David Mwambari's research on vernacular and informal memory in post-genocide Rwanda shows that this informal commemoration still goes on. Mwambari describes how people hold informal prayer groups on the sidelines of official commemorations and console each other through storytelling. There are some who have turned former homes into shrine-like spaces, preserving the interiors as a memory of the missing family members (in this case those disappeared in the DRC). Mwambari tells a story of a returnee to Rwanda whose former house is locked and kept as a sort of memorial to his missing wife and child, where the past can be kept alive through visits, prayers and informal gatherings with close family members who knew them well. In Rwanda, these activities are nonetheless not labelled as commemoration in order to prevent accusations of genocide ideology, which is punishable by law. Many young people have also turned to digital spaces, which offer new avenues to commemorate what would not be possible offline.