



Preserving History in Rwanda

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Introduction

Dear ladies and gentlemen,

Which pasts are public historians telling on the web, and which not? This subject, addressed in the introduction of the theme of this conference, caught my attention immediately. It is an exciting question, relating as it does to all aspects of my work as an archivist. It indicates appraisal and selection, references the way we organize our access tools for the archival collections, and so on. Actually, every time a decision is made in the process of archive management, it has consequences for the story which can be extracted from it. I would like to illustrate this in my paper by focusing on my own experiences with a project with which NIOD is involved in Rwanda. For this project, the NIOD archives department undertook with a Rwandan partner a research into archives related to the genocide which took place in 1994. These archives are envisioned to form the heart of a documentation center in the capital of Rwanda, Kigali.

Rwanda

Rwanda is situated in Central Africa, close to the equator. It is a small country, with about twelve million citizens today. Being located in the Great Lakes Region, Rwanda is a lush, hilly country. It is therefore quite fertile by African standards. In this beautiful country, however, a genocide took place in 1994. Over the course of around one hundred days, more than 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus were killed by government forces and militia. One can imagine that these events had a devastating impact on the country; in effect, Rwanda was totally destroyed in 1994.

This, now, is twenty years ago. Many things have changed in Rwanda. And those who visit Rwanda today find a completely different country including a capital with a modern city centre with several shopping malls. Though the situation in Kigali is obviously not representative for the situation throughout the entire country, the capital reflects some of the turbulent developments in today's Rwanda. What makes Rwanda even more exceptional is that, even though the process of transitional justice and reconciliation is complex and difficult, the Hutu and the Tutsi now live alongside each other, despite all that happened.

Kigali Genocide Memorial²

On one of the hills just outside the center of the capital, one finds the Kigali Genocide Memorial. This center was opened on the 10th Anniversary of the Rwandan Genocide, in April 2004. Part of the site of

¹ Conference website: <http://publichistory.humanities.uva.nl/>.

² Website Kigali Genocide Memorial: <http://www.kigaligenocidememorial.org/>.

the memorial are mass graves where over 250,000 victims of the genocide are buried. On the grounds of the center one finds the national flame, which is lit annually during the commemoration period. The memorial also has a museum, an education center, and a documentation center, the Genocide Archive Rwanda.

The Kigali Genocide Memorial is coordinated by the British NGO Aegis Trust³. This trust develops various projects related to the prevention of genocide, operating in the UK and the US as well. The involvement of this British NGO has, however, not given the memorial the white, western, non-African image which one might have expected. The Aegis Trust hires local Rwandans to manage and staff the memorial.

Genocide Archive Rwanda

The Genocide Archive Rwanda, a department of the Kigali Genocide Memorial is managed by Yves Kamurongi. As a survivor of the genocide, he lost both of his parents during the genocide. Yves has worked at the memorial since it was founded. The archive started off small, primarily focusing on materials which could be used for exhibitions in the museum. But the collection grew organically, though, leading to the launch of the Genocide Archive Rwanda⁴ in 2010.

The genocide archive building hosts, first of all, a reading room, which is open for researchers and other visitors. The collection itself consists of audio recordings, mainly testimonies, pictures, a collection of archival documents, and a library. Part of the collection is also accessible online.

A strong motivation in collecting all this material is to fight against genocide denial. Freddy Mutanguha, the director of the memorial and also the Aegis Trust director for Rwanda, frequently stresses this aspect of his work in talks and interviews: "Nearly 20 years after the Genocide we still have denials of genocide. The only weapon is to keep evidence of what happened, that will show how it was planned and executed".⁵ One important source of evidence regarding the genocide are the memories of the people who experienced it. In recent years, about 3,000 testimonies have been collected. The majority of these testimonies consist of interviews with survivors of the genocide.

The testimony collection also includes recordings made of members of other groups, such as rescuers and perpetrators. The latter were collected in cooperation with the post genocide courts. This context obviously influences the content of the interviews, which point is documented on the website by characterizing the testimonies as confessions and highlighting the apologies the perpetrators offer "to the survivors, Rwandan society and the Government of Rwanda for their crimes".⁶

Alongside the testimonies there are also other materials gathered by the documentation center, showing the dehumanization of Tutsis by Hutu powers in the 1990's, and traces of the massacres. One such collection comprises issues of *Kangura*, an influential Rwandan newspaper which spread anti-Tutsi propaganda in the early nineties; another example are photographs of burials and commemorations.

³ Website Aegis Trust: <http://www.aegistrust.org/>.

⁴ Website Genocide Archive Rwanda:

⁵ Quote: <http://rwandaexpress.blogspot.nl/2013/11/aegis-trust-cnlg-in-joint-efforts-to.html> (12 November 2013).

⁶ See for instance: http://www.genocidearchiverwanda.org.rw/index.php?title=KMC00542_vid3.

The motivation to gather evidence of the genocide to fight genocide denial goes hand-in-hand with the personal motivations of the members of staff working at the memorial. This was expressed by Claver Irakoze in an interview on the NIOD website. When we asked him why he is devoted to his job, he pointed out the importance of education, the hope that new generations will build a peaceful society by learning from the mistakes of the past and by being taught about what happened.⁷

Envisioned: National Genocide Documentation Center

The Genocide Archive Rwanda has received a great deal of support over the years from various institutions. The University of Texas Libraries⁸ and the USC Shoah Foundation⁹ – both from the US – were driving forces in helping the documentation center become what it is today. But the genocide archive is still in search of options for expansion, wanting to bring the collection to the next level and to become an important research center, attracting more local and international researchers. They are working at expansion by acquiring new archives and collections.

To further their efforts, they asked NIOD last year to lead a *feasibility study*.¹⁰ And among other things, they asked us to look with them into the availability of existing archives and collections in Rwanda. It was in many ways a very interesting assignment. The draft mission that we used in undertaking the study was to envision:

“a national genocide documentation center that aims to preserve the history of genocide perpetrated against Tutsi in Rwanda, its causes and the post- genocide recovery period (...)”

(Feasibility Study Report, April 2013)

Working with the staff, it became clear that new accents had been introduced in comparison with the current collection: evidence of the genocide and denial thereof are still a central theme, but there is now also strong interest in collecting materials which put the history of the genocide into the broader perspective of the history of Rwanda as a whole.

To address this theme, we visited some relatively old organizations in Rwanda to gather information on the archives they keep. Included were state-owned and private organizations. We visited, for instance, the National Archives of Rwanda, which has materials dating back to the 1920's. And we also went to Kinyamateka – the first newspaper to operate in Rwanda, owned by the Catholic church. Their archive goes back to 1933.

Another interesting priority was also provided by the staff: collect materials telling the story of the post-genocide period. Of critical importance in this respect is the archive of the Gacaca Courts. These courts, operative in the wake of the genocide until 2012, tried the alleged perpetrators of the mass killings. Over the course of ten years, the courts concluded almost 2 million cases. It requires no further explanation that the archives of the Gacaca courts, which include an estimated 60 million documents,

⁷ Article on NIOD website: <http://www.niod.nl/nl/held-van-de-maand/mei-claver-irakoze> (May 2013).

⁸ Website University of Texas Libraries: <http://www.lib.utexas.edu/>.

⁹ Website USC Shoah Foundation: <https://sfi.usc.edu/>.

¹⁰ Article on NIOD website: <http://www.niod.nl/en/projects/feasibility-study-genocide-documentation-centre-rwanda>.

contain many stories of the genocide and therefore forms a picture of how the state dealt with this tragic period in the history of Rwanda.

But there is more that drives the staff of the memorial to acquire archives dealing with the post-genocide period. And that is pride. What Rwanda has been able to achieve, how it has recovered from the genocide, instills a feeling of satisfaction. And it is this story as well which the staff wants to document at the renewed center. This aspiration doesn't stand alone; it is the same message that President Kagame told during the twentieth commemoration on April 2014, highlighting unity and the ambitions of the new Rwanda.

These examples of the stories which will be told by the envisioned new documentation center were drawn from the many brainstorming sessions held by members of the memorial's staff during the feasibility study. There are, however, also requests from external organizations which have an impact on the envisioned activities of the center. And, in the cases which I will highlight here, these especially affect the planning and development of access tools regarding the archive of the Gacaca courts.

Very influential in this respect is the so-called National Commission for the Fight Against Genocide (CNLG)¹¹. This Rwandan state organization has, alongside their primary interest in genocide prevention, which overlaps with the vision of the KGM, interests related to their responsibilities as the holder of the Gacaca archive. As previously stated, this archive was amassed from records kept by the courts which conducted trials until 2012. However, as there are still ongoing appeals around the country regarding cases transferred to regular courts, CNLG receives requests from third parties for information from the archive on a daily basis. These requests often involve, for instance, a need to locate specific case files. For CNLG, these requests are problematic because retrieving information from the archive is difficult due to the fact that the documents in the archive are not yet well organized and appropriate access tools are not available. These requests to CNLG, therefore, instilled a new priority for the envisioned centre, namely to enable searching the Gacaca archive for specific names.

And CNLG is not the only party to hold this special interest. It would also be very helpful for international participants such as the Dutch International Crimes Team to have access to such a system in their search for information on perpetrators of the genocide possibly staying in the Netherlands. It is therefore not surprising that researchers from the International Crimes Team expressed interest specifically in access tools related to searching on names.

In addition to the question which priorities are included in activities of the envisioned centre, there is also the question of what is *excluded*. And this is not an easy one to answer. Maybe I can refer here to the question that a colleague of mine asked me when I presented the feasibility study to him a couple of months ago. His question was: do you also look into the archives of the perpetrators' interest groups? I had to tell him that this is indeed a logical question when asked by a scholar in the Dutch context, but in regard to the Rwandan context it is possibly going too far. In a country where perpetrators and survivors of the genocide live side by side, cases of conflicting stories of the genocide are, not surprisingly, avoided by the current Rwandan government.

¹¹ Website CNLG: <http://www.cnl.gov.rw/>.

Conclusion

I hope that my story today shows that preserving the history of the genocide in Rwanda is not solely about conserving records of the past; but is also intrinsically connected to the present. One could say that it is a living history. Personal, political and judicial interests directly affect which memories are preserved and how they are made accessible.

Rwanda is not unique in this respect. I hope that my paper also illustrates how archives are a result of the context that established them. Every archive tells a story. Archivists, as they appraise and select materials and choose access strategies, have a view on which story should be told and how the archives should be accessed, and thus influence what historians can extract from it. This in itself is not a problem, actually I think it is unavoidable, and should be judged as such.

The subjectivity of archives can, however, become problematic when archives are looked at as neutral, undisputed institutions. I started my talk with the question: 'Which pasts are public historians telling on the web, and which not?' It is my view that answering this question should start with a thorough reflection on the archives that have been consulted and the stories historians were directed to tell by archivists.

Thank you.