Music and the politics of the past: Kizito Mihigo and music in the commemoration of the genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda

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Abstract
After the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda, the post-genocide government spearheaded the creation of genocide commemorations. Over the past two decades, political elites and survivors’ organizations have gone to great lengths to institutionalize the memorialization, including creating laws to protect the memory of the genocide from denialism. Ordinary Rwandans have responded to the annual commemorations using creative means of support for and disagreement with the government’s interpretation of their shared violent past. Music has been used as citizen-driven tool to both spread and criticize genocide memorialization nationally and beyond. While scholars have explored the politicization of state-organized mechanisms such as memorials, citizen-driven creative means remain largely unexplored. Addressing this gap in Rwandan memory scholarship, I examine how Kizito Mihigo, a famous post-genocide musician, used his individual memory of surviving the genocide against the Tutsi through music to contribute and respond to the annual commemorations of the genocide. I argue that Mihigo’s story and commemoration songs were politicized from the start but were intensified when he used his music to go beyond promoting genocide commemorations to questioning the events and when he pleaded guilty to terrorism charges.

Keywords
commemorations, Kizito Mihigo, music, politics of memory, post-genocide Rwanda

Introduction
After the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda, the government led by the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) spearheaded the construction of an official historical memory of the genocide. Over the past two decades, RPF elites and survivors’ organizations have gone to great lengths to institutionalize and systematize the official narrative, including creating laws to protect the memory of the genocide from denialism. Over the years, the official narrative has been communicated through state-organized and citizen-driven channels using individual survivor stories (Ibreck, 2010; Jessee,
Genocide memory is at the centre of national politics, foreign policy-making and socio-economic programmes in what has become an authoritarian political climate (Straus and Waldorf, 2011). Ruling elites and stakeholders have devised state-driven mechanisms such as memorials, the annual commemoration that starts in April and ends in June, gacaca courts and what scholars refer to as lieux de mémoire, or sites of memory, through which the official narrative has evolved (Nora, 2001).

Ordinary Rwandans have responded to this official memory using creative means of support for or disagreement with the government’s interpretation of their shared violent past; or, like post-genocide musician Kizito Mihigo, both. While some citizens support the official memory through voluntary participation in commemoration events, like visits to memorials, others have used means such as attacking genocide survivors or mourners to express their disagreement with what is remembered and forgotten each year (Ibreck, 2013). In addition, different forms of art in general have been used as citizen-driven tools to both spread and criticize genocide memory nationally and beyond (Norridge, 2009). Music, in particular, has played a leading role in promoting and critiquing annual commemorations and genocide memory. While scholars have explored the politicization of state-organized mechanisms such as memorials, citizen-driven means remain largely unexplored. There is also limited literature on the role and power of music in the politicization of memorialization. Addressing this gap in memory scholarship, I examine how Kizito Mihigo, a famous post-genocide musician, used his personal memory of surviving the genocide through music to contribute and respond to the government’s version of genocide memory. I argue that Mihigo’s story and music caused public tensions once he composed a song that conflicted with the official commemoration discourse, revealing a larger pattern of tensions between individual and official memory. His music on commemoration was already politicized but with the composition of Igisobanuro cy’urupfu and his arrest, his personal story and music became explicitly political.

The analysis below is informed by interviews I conducted between 2010 and 2014 for a larger project on the evolution of commemoration in post-genocide Rwanda. On different visits, I spent between 4 and 8 weeks and visited Rwanda a minimum of three times a year, largely focused on this research. In total, I recorded and transcribed 35 interviews collected in three districts in the southern part of Rwanda, one district in Eastern Province, in the capital city and one district in northern Rwanda. The article also relies on field ethnographic notes and a review of secondary data. As a Kinyarwanda speaker, I supervised the translations of his Mihigo’s into English and consulted a Rwandan linguistics scholar to ensure the meanings were accurate.

Following this introduction, the second section provides historical analysis of the political significance of music and artists in Rwanda. I then examine how Mihigo’s ‘iconic story’ of survival (Jessee, 2017), and two of his most popular songs – Amateka (History) and Ijoro ribara uwariraye (The One Who Was Awake Narrates the Night Tales) – informed his activism through music promoting the official commemorations of the genocide from 2008 to 2011. The third part shows the political tensions that arose when Mihigo composed lyrics that were contrary to the state’s message during the 20th anniversary commemorations in 2014 with his song Igisobanure cy’urupfu (The Meaning of Death). The fourth section draws on interviews and explores the significance of Mihigo’s personal story and music to Rwandans with regard to Rwanda’s disputed past. The article concludes by reflecting on how the high level of politicization of the process of creating an official narrative in post-genocide or post-conflict settings such as Rwanda increases the risks related to the use of citizen-driven mechanisms to reckon with the violent past. Kizito Mihigo’s case illustrates the centrality of music in post-conflict societies, from its role in memorialization to its significance in healing processes and shaping the politics of remembering. I argue that Mihigo’s experiences show that musicians have the power to mobilize, politicize, shape and respond to collective memory in unique and powerful ways in the aftermath of mass violence. To begin, I first
contextualize Kizito Mihigo’s work with a brief exploration of Rwanda’s recent history in terms of the politics of memory and specifically the role of music.

**Politics of memory in Rwanda**

The insurgency launched by the Rwandan Patriotic Army (RPA, the military arm of the RPF) in the 1990s, aimed at overthrowing the Hutu-dominated Habyarimana regime, was partly influenced by stories about the militants’ Rwandan homeland that their parents had told them for decades while living in refugee camps in Uganda, Kenya, Burundi or then Zaire (Des Forges, 1999; Longman, 2017; Prunier, 1995). Given the difficulties Rwandan refugees in Uganda faced, they created a narrative of ‘a mythical country’ of milk and honey (Prunier, 1995: 66). Like Burundian Hutu refugees in Tanzania, their displacement led them to create ‘nationness, history and identity’ (Malkki, 1995: 1). Thus, collective remembering motivated them to undertake efforts to forget their terrible conditions as refugees (Malkki, 1995) and propelled them to mobilize young refugees in the region to attack Rwanda in October 1990 (Longman, 2017). After winning the war and ending the genocide in July 1994, the RPF sought to change Rwandan society and also write a new official Rwandan history that unequivocally categorized Tutsi as Rwandans and not as aliens, as they had been portrayed in history books under the Hutu-dominated post-colonial regimes (Longman, 2017). But they went beyond this correction, creating an official narrative of what happened during the genocide and how that violent and divisive period in Rwanda’s history should be remembered.

In the early years following the RPF takeover, the post-genocide governmental elites endeavoured to create new economic, social and political policies that affected different spheres of life for ordinary Rwandans in rural and urban areas (Ansoms, 2009). At the centre of these policies was the 1994 genocide that was used to explain the need for this new transformation of Rwandan society. Genocide memorials were built around the country, and annual commemoration rituals became a constant reminder to not only Rwandans of their violent past but also to the rest of the world that a genocide had taken place (Burnet, 2012; Ibreck, 2010; Meierhenrich, 2011). Due to these policies, Rwandans feel the weight of history around them. ‘Most Rwandans say that much as they try to put the events of the genocide behind them, they can’t. “How can you forget when there are genocide sites everywhere around us?”’ (Hintjens, 2008: 34).

Yet critics argue that the RPF-led government has institutionalized memorialization of the genocide to secure and maintain its political power in Rwanda (Reyntjens, 2004). As Filip Reyntjens (2011) asserts, the post-genocide government has used ‘the genocide credit’ to avoid being held responsible for crimes they committed inside and outside of Rwanda (p. 210) and also to manipulate and solicit funding from western donors that are blamed for betraying Rwandans during the 1994 genocide (Ibreck, 2013; Marvin, 2010). Other scholars have demonstrated that although the government insists that memorials and commemoration ceremonies are for the purpose of reconciliation among Rwandans, in reality, these ceremonies have often exacerbated divisions among Rwandans (Burnet, 2008; Kamanzi, 2004; Lemarchand, 2006). For instance, the RPF’s interpretation of Rwanda’s recent, violent past presents Hutu as perpetrators who must apologize to Tutsi survivors (Vidal, 2001). Furthermore, researchers have shown that some Rwandans who disagree with the government’s account of the past consider annual commemorations as ‘*une affaire des Tutsis ou les Hutus ne s’y retrouvent pas*’ (‘Tutsi affairs where the Hutu do not belong’) (Zorbas, 2004: 40). Scholars further argue that these divisions are not just between Hutu and Tutsi but also among Tutsi themselves, especially in cases where Tutsi survivors have disagreed with government elites over the handling of the remains of their loved ones (Meierhenrich, 2011). Some prefer that the bones displayed in memorials around the country be buried (Meierhenrich, 2011). Yet, questioning or going against the official version of the genocide
narrative or tampering with memories can result in serious consequences including prison sentences, as in the case of opposition leader Victoire Ingabire (Masabo, 2013). Ingabire was charged with denying the genocide after she arrived in Rwanda from exile when, while visiting the Kigali Genocide Memorial, she asked for justice for victims of the RPF who were not Tutsi nor killed in the genocide. She was found guilty and charged as a genocide denier under a new anti-genocide denial law (Masabo, 2013). However, critics have insisted that the anti-genocide law has been politicized and is used to control political opposition such as Ingabire, who planned to contest Kagame in the 2010 presidential elections (Gready, 2010; Longman, 2017; Reyntjens, 2011). The Ingabire case and others are given as examples in the literature of how the Rwandan government responds to alternative versions of history.

Yet, as Phil Clark (2010) reminds us, ‘history and memory are unavoidably contested’, and ‘there can never be “collective memory” to which all citizens subscribe’ (p. 218). In examining Kizito Mihigo’s music and personal story as a genocide survivor, I argue that even those who are considered to be long-term supporters of the official narrative, such as Mihigo, face negative consequences when they challenge the silences in public memory in Rwanda. Mihigo’s story also shows that when such challenges occur, there is indeed a price to pay, even for Tutsi genocide survivors or members of the RPF elite. However, before taking an in-depth look at Mihigo’s music and his personal life, it is necessary to describe the political and historical context in which artists in post-genocide Rwanda are situated.

**Music and the politics of memory in Rwanda**

Artists began engaging with genocide memory within a decade after the genocide had ended. Before that, though present in various commemorations, few participated publicly as they do now. There are several reasons for this. First, some artists were afraid of engaging in this sensitive topic, especially after artwork was used to endorse and actively promote the genocide. Second, the arts industry had been affected by the genocide: artists had been targeted, some killed. In addition, artists in general had little means or support, given the austere material conditions that prevailed in the mid-to-late 1990s.

Following the RPF’s launch of its insurgency campaign against the Habyarimana government in October 1990, a small but influential group of Hutu elites intensified anti-Tutsi campaigns inside Rwanda (Des Forges, 1999). The group included politicians, businesspeople, intellectuals and artists. Among them was Simon Bikindi, a prominent Hutu musician. His art played an influential role in spreading the hatred that eventually fuelled the genocide against the Tutsi in 1994. Bikindi’s music was played by *Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines* (known by its French acronym RTLM) on a daily basis during the genocide. Alison Des Forges (1999) observed that ‘when patrols went out to kill, they went off singing the songs heard on RTLM such as those of the popular Simon Bikindi’ (p. 246). There is no evidence that Bikindi himself instructed the radio to play his music or give it such interpretation, nor his exact intentions when he composed most of his songs before the genocide (McCoy, 2013: X). However, as the director of the Irindiro Ballet Company, the judges at the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) noted in their sentencing that Bikindi was a celebrity, especially among pre-genocide Rwandan elites and that he used his influence to incite genocide through speech (Grant et al., 2010; Li, 2004; McCoy, 2013: 11). After a long trial at the ICTR that attracted international attention, especially from defenders of free speech, Bikindi was convicted and imprisoned for 15 years, not directly for his music but for speeches he made during the genocide (McCoy, 2013; Snyder, 2006). On 2 December 2008, while reporting the judge’s verdict on Bikindi’s case, Marlise Simons (2008) of the *New York Times* described him as the ‘first entertainer to be found guilty of a genocide-related charge’.
Unlike Bikindi, artists who were Tutsi or perceived as Tutsi sympathizers were targeted and killed during the genocide. Cyprien Rugamba is one example among many. Rugamba, director of a traditional dance company called *Amasimbi n’Amakombe*, was killed on 7 April 1994, the first day of the genocide (Henley, 2007). Famous for lyrics that resonated with people of all levels of the Rwandan society (Alexis and Mpambara, 2003), he was an icon and a critic of the pre-genocide government. For example, his song *Agaca* was understood to critique elites in the government who were corrupt. Similarly, Jean Paul Samputu, a famous singer, was imprisoned as an *icyitso*, or spy for the RPF, in 1993 (Jones, 2013; Swanson, 2014). Rwanda’s case demonstrates the importance of music to promote both violence and peace. Though there is limited literature on the subject, this dichotomy is a major theme in scholarly discussions of music as a tool for either conflict or peace around the world.

**Music during and after conflict**

There is a growing literature that examines the importance of music and musicians in conflict and post-conflict politics of rebuilding. In discussing what he calls the ‘artistic five minutes’, referring to musicians’ performances, John Paul Lederach (2005) has argued that

> when [music] is given space and acknowledged as something far beyond entertainment, [it] accomplishes what most of politics has been unable to attain: It helps us return to humanity, a transcendent journey that, like the moral imagination, can build a sense that we are, after all, a human community.

He gives examples of musician Kanja Kouyate and the role he played in resolving a border dispute between Mali and Burkina Faso in the 1980s, using a song that appealed to the collective memory of both countries’ ancestors (Lederach, 2005). Maria Elisa Pinto García (2014) complements Lederach’s argument and adds that as an art form, music has the capacity to ‘allow people to find each other’s humanity, release and share emotions, heal personal and/or collective trauma, communicate their versions of the truth, appreciate the narrative of the other, deal with identity issues, transform relationships and bring people together’ (p. 30).

For the purpose of analysing Rwanda and Mihigo, two bodies of research are worth identifying that explore how music is used both as a tool for conflict and for rebuilding after conflict. In the first, given music’s power to mobilize communities, politicians use it as a tool to advance political goals sometimes expressed through violent means. George Kent has further argued that music is sometimes used as a tool for propaganda by those who have political power. He gives an example of the use of classical music in Nazi Germany (Kent, 2008: 106). He documents other examples that show that music has been used to ‘celebrate war, viciousness, hate and humiliation’ (Kent, 2008: 104) like it was the case with propaganda during the genocide in Rwanda, as discussed in the next section. Johnson and Cloonan’s (2013) *Dark Side of the Tune: Popular Music and Violence* further distinguishes how music can incite, accompany, arouse or express violence.

In the case of the second type of literature, researchers have demonstrated that music can be used in conflict transformation, through creating narratives about a shared violent past and in building peace after conflict. For example, research in Colombia shows how music has helped victims engage in a reconciliation process through storytelling and discussing the past (García, 2014). Cesar Lopez, who used short guns to make *escopeterras* or guitars in Colombia, is a good example of a musician that used his art for storytelling (García, 2014). Similar examples of music used as a tool for restoring relationships can be found in a study that focused on resolving religious conflicts in Lebanon and Indonesia as well as in Serbia during its period of transitional justice.
(Rush and Simi, 2014), and through drumming in Burundi or songs in South Africa (Slachmuisjlder, 2005). Kizito Mihigo’s music belongs to this category as the few years he spent influencing discourses of commemoration and collective memory in Rwanda were for peace and reconciliation purposes.

Mihigo the musician, the survivor and the reconciliation activist

In 1994, after the genocide, musicians who were pro-RPF or Tutsi had fled the country, but their artwork was known in Rwanda. In the immediate aftermath, members of ballets and the media were either dead, outside the country, or inside the country with little means to participate in cultural production. The physical infrastructure on which such production depended was destroyed, as well as society in general.

In April 2012, I attended a Kizito Mihigo concert at the Hotel Serena in Kigali. The concert was among the many activities that Mihigo’s organization, Kizito Mihigo for Peace (KMP), organized annually during the remembrance period between April and June from 2011 through 2014. In between songs, Mihigo spoke about his background. He was born in 1981 in the former prefecture of Gikongoro into a family that lived near the small town of Kibeho. In 2014, Kibeho was declared a holy place based on stories that the Virgin Mary appeared to area residents and gave them various personal and national prophecies. Mihigo’s birth coincided with the appearance of the Virgin Mary, and therefore, he asserted, his parents raised him a strict Catholic. In Kibeho, Mihigo started composing children’s songs at the age of nine.

While addressing his audience at a concert, Mihigo reflected on a time shortly after the genocide when he met his father’s killer, Dr. Mutazihana. They were both in Burundi as refugees. Dr. Mutazihana had been a neighbour of Mihigo’s family. ‘[He] had a daughter [Fifi]’, Mihigo explained, ‘who was a close friend of mine during my primary school days at Kibeho primary school’. He remembered, ‘[Seeing him] naturally pushed me to try the revenge of my father’s death’. Therefore, Mihigo tried to join the RPA, but he failed as he was too young. However, a few months later, after his return to Rwanda, his career began to flourish. This was also the moment he began to struggle with two of the emotional pillars of post-genocide memorialization: hatred and forgiveness.

In 1995, at the age of 14, Mihigo enrolled in the prestigious Petit Seminaire de Butare and joined the school’s choir. Among choir members and schoolmates were boys whose parents had been leaders of the Interahamwe – a prominent militia group that carried out the genocide – in his town and had tried to exterminate Mihigo’s family. He recounted to the concert’s audience how, for a time, he was very angry and wished he could bully the boys or somehow take revenge on them. Nevertheless, through interactions and meeting in choir practices, Mihigo saw the opportunity to reconcile with these boys:

> Just being able to rehearse with such a group of people offered me this transformation that I needed badly. I naturally thought about those boys every single day; however, with time, just being with them changed my thinking and I had to accept a number of things in my life.

By age 19, young Mihigo had composed 200 liturgical songs that were popular in Catholic masses nationally (Kizito Mihigo Peace Foundation, 2014). In addition, in 2000, he collaborated with other Rwandan musicians to compose the Rwandan National Anthem. Following this national exposure, Mihigo was given a scholarship to study in France. During this period, he began to write lyrics that were crucial in his own journey, spoke to his memory and called Rwandans to reconciliation and forgiveness.
In 2004, while visiting Rwanda, Mihigo found out that Dr. Mutazihana and his wife were imprisoned. Without access to them, he searched for his childhood friend Fifi. He told the audience at a concert his memories of that day:

We shared a meal and I told her that I knew that her parents were involved in the death of my father and that is why they are serving time in prison. However, I told her not to be afraid, as I had moved on by forgiving her parents. Instead I asked her to recall the sweet memories we shared before the genocide.

Their friendship was restored, and they continued to meet. After completing his studies in Paris in 2008, he taught music in Belgium, and his concerts of mainly Catholic songs became fora in which Hutu, Tutsi and Twa, as well as exiled politicians in France and Belgium, could meet. Within this context, Mihigo evolved to focus on commemoration and found a platform in the Rwandan community both in Rwanda and in the diaspora. Although Mihigo has composed various commemoration songs, his 2011 hit Twanze Gutoberwa Amateka (hereafter Amateka), which he released for the 17th commemoration ceremony in 2011, is especially worthy of further examination.

*Mihigo’s work on memory*

As he explained during the concert, Mihigo composed his songs while living in France or working in Belgium and reflecting on his earlier experiences. Two compositions that arose from these reflections shaped conversations among Rwandans during the 2011 and 2012 commemorations: the 2011 Amateka (History) and the 2012 Ijoro Ribara Uwariraye (loosely: The One Who Was Awake Narrates the Night Tales; hereafter The One Who Was Awake). These songs became hits in Rwanda during the commemoration period due to a number of factors, two of which stand out. First, the songs frankly address key questions that had been at the centre of debates on commemoration among Rwandans. Second, Mihigo used a unique style for his music and capitalized on his identity to engage with larger Rwandan society in ways that no other musician had done.

During Mihigo’s concert in April 2012, I noticed that most people remained seated throughout the evening as he played his tunes with a church’s piano while singing at the same time. However, as he sang particular songs, like Ijoro ribara uwariraye for instance, Claudette, a young mother of two and a genocide survivor who was seated next to me, stood up. She started to move slowly while singing out loud the lyrics. I approached her, and she agreed to an interview. She told me that she often played the song at home, especially in April. When I asked why she stood up, she replied,

I stood up because that song tells my story; I spent many nights in the banana plantations behind our house, some days if Interahamwe came to look for us in the evening we would run and hide sometimes the whole night. (Interview with Claudette, Kigali, 2012)

She continued, ‘when I first heard this song, I thought he [Mihigo] was talking about my story’. Claudette explained how the song and its lyrics brought back her memories. It has been argued that our ‘emotions are attached to particular songs, a connection that is literally located in the body/mind’ (Van Dijck, 2006: 358). Thus, the process of remembering through music is an ‘active, interpretive process of a conscious mind situated in the world’ (Van Dijck, 2006: 215).

In conversations about commemoration, Rwandans debated who should be addressed and remembered in acts and events of commemoration. These questions are dealt with in both songs. Mihigo explicitly calls on all Rwandans to take on this remembrance and the conservation of memory as their responsibility. For example, in the second stanza of Amateka he sings, ‘Dear Rwandan brothers and sisters, let us be united’. He continues, ‘Our history, either the best or the
worst, let us protect it from torturers with destroying thoughts, let the real love of our country induce us to defend it’. \textit{Amateka} includes all Rwandans, calling them to be part of the community that remembers. In the second song, \textit{The One Who Was Awake}, the question of who he is addressing is central in the opening lines of the song. Mihigo starts the song in the style he uses for most of his songs, playing soft keyboard tunes and singing: ‘\textit{Bana b’iwacu I Rwanda nimuze twibuke, twibuke Jenoside yakorwe abatutsi}’ (‘Children of our homeland Rwanda, come let us remember, remember the genocide against the Tutsi’). This is an even more direct and inclusive call to all to accept the duty of remembering, though, as I will show in the next section, he takes a particular position here. In the following lines, he explains why he makes this appeal: ‘\textit{Rubanda banyimye amatwi, ngo akenshi niye mvuga ishavu, ntibazi ko muriyo shavu ariho hashibutse imbaraga z’u Rwanda}’ (‘The other people out there have denied me their attention, saying that often I speak of misery, yet they don’t know that it’s in that misery that Rwanda found its strength’). The song’s release coincided with the announcement by the organizers of state-driven memory that commemoration would be taken to the village level for participation by every Rwandan – and especially, young Rwandans. \textit{The One Who Was Awake} was, in essence, a personal hymn to national unity and to a reconstructed, reconciled Rwandan nation.

Another reason for Mihigo’s appeal is that he has been able to capitalize on his identity as Catholic, a youth and a survivor to reach various audiences, organize campaigns and transmit reconciliation messages. As an influential Catholic composer, he had a name that was already well known to a large majority of Rwandans, given that even today the Catholic Church has the largest percentage of followers in Rwanda (International Religious Freedom Report, 2016). Despite some of its priests and nuns having been accused of participating in the genocide, the Catholic Church remains influential in Rwanda (Longman, 2010; Rittner et al., 2004). Mihigo’s rhythm resonates with both accused perpetrators and survivors who are Catholics; as a reassuringly familiar musical cadence, it can be effectively paired with a deeply discomforting subject. Furthermore, his lyrical allusions to Christian rhetoric and concepts even attract other Christians. Consider these lines of \textit{Amateka}: ‘I am not trying to praise the Cross itself, I am rather commending the resurrection it has brought to me’. He then ends the bridge with the following lines: ‘\textit{Jenoside yakorewe abatutsi, niwo musaraba w’uru Rwanda}’ (‘Genocide against the Tutsi is the cross for Rwanda’). Thus, in \textit{Amateka}, Mihigo uses the Christian image of the cross – an important symbol of the story of Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection, which thereby points towards Easter, which also takes place in April (the month of commemoration). His implicit conclusion is that the genocide in Rwanda was the cross for Rwanda; by implication he compares the resurrection of Rwanda with the resurrection of Christ. Furthermore, in both songs, he contrasts darkness to light, thus employing an opposition that is equally central to the Christian belief that Jesus died on the cross to bring light into the world (John 1: 3–5, New International Version (NIV)). These powerful allusions to the Bible were familiar terrain not only to Catholics but to other Christians as well.

Mihigo was among the first survivors to occupy a public stage in commemoration, with compositions that attracted a large audience that included Rwandans of all kinds of backgrounds. His identity gave him the prerogative to directly urge survivors to come out and testify and use their testimonies as evidence that the genocide took place. The title \textit{The One Who Was Awake} insists, ‘The one who was awake narrates the night’s tale’. The lyrics of this song further confirm his message to other survivors: ‘Since we are the ones who were wronged, we will be the ones to sow the seeds of peace’; ‘Since we knew division, we will be the ones who will preach unity’. The background in the song’s video displays photo images of victims and survivors at the Kigali Memorial Center’s permanent exhibition as Mihigo sings about the importance of speaking out. In April 2012, I had an opportunity to discuss Mihigo’s music with him during a community commemoration event where he performed this song. He explained that he composed it not only to encourage
survivors to speak up about their testimonies but also to empower the younger generation to build a positive future for themselves regardless of the history they hear from their parents, other adults or teachers. His young audience is, thus, as important as those in prisons or survivors like those who were present at that community event. However, for his songs in 2012, Mihigo was criticized as having left his Christian songs for political ones. In his response, articulated during various concerts I attended, he insisted that he sang about social issues and the history of his country and that this did not automatically make him a politician. Yet, the message of his composition for the 20th commemoration in 2014 put him at the centre of Rwandan politics.

**Daring to question the silence of Rwandan political history**

As the 20th commemoration ceremonies approached in 2014, Mihigo composed a new song, *Igisobanuro cy’urupfu* (The Meaning of Death). In this song, he sang about the past as he had done in other songs analysed in previous sections of this article. However, his lyrics, released in 2014, only through YouTube, changed his message and challenged the official genocide narrative. In the lyrics of this song, Mihigo made important yet controversial points.

His introductory lines were similar to his previous lyrics: ‘*Urupfu nicyo cyibi kiruta ibindi, ariko rutubera inzira, inzira igana icyiza cyiruta ibindi*’ (‘Death is the worst thing that can happen, yet something that creates a good road that leads to something better than anything else’). The next point he made was most relevant to commemoration controversies in post-genocide Rwanda: ‘*Ntarupfu rwiza rubaho, yaba Jenoside, cyangwa intambara, uwishwe n’ abihorera, uwazize impanuka, cyangwa se uwazize indwara*’ (‘There is no good death, whether genocide, the civil war, being killed in revenge attacks, or dying from illness’); he concludes that all deaths are equally worthy of remembrance.

‘The Meaning of Death’ was equally revealing about the silences in the official genocide narrative. He sang, ‘*Abo bavandimwe Aho bicaye baradusabira*’ (‘Those relatives, wherever they are seated, they pray for us’). He continued,

Though the genocide orphaned me, let it not make me lose empathy for others. Their lives, too, were brutally taken but not qualified as genocide. Those brothers and sisters, they too are human beings. I pray for them. I comfort them. I remember them.

Then, in his song, Mihigo declared his criticism against the government-endorsed programme called *Ndi Umunyarwanda* (‘I Am a Rwandan’). He continues with the lyrics: ‘My dignity and love are not rooted in carnal life, nor in material possessions, but in humanity, humaneness. Let the words “I am Rwandan” be preceded by “I am HUMAN!”’.

Mihigo, as in his other commemorative songs, sings about death and contrasts it with light, with the Christian undertone of a promised better future with God. These words were introductory, providing the context for the rest of *The Meaning of Death*. However, it was the second stanza that caused controversy and revived debates on what is remembered and forgotten during the state-led commemoration. Mihigo, with his characteristic mastery of Kinyarwanda, asserted that all deaths, including those not given the prestige to be remembered in the commemoration of the genocide against the Tutsi, are important. He acknowledged that some died in revenge attacks. Although he did not clearly state which revenge attacks he was referring to, many Rwandans understood him to refer to Hutu killed by the RPA soldiers in the Kibeho massacre and in refugee camps in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC, then Zaire) (O’Halloran, 2010; Prunier, 2009). Therefore, many Hutu in Rwanda and outside applauded Mihigo for finally acknowledging other versions of *amateka*, or history. The reference to those who died in circumstances other than the genocide was...
important to include in his declaration that all deaths are equally worthy of remembrance with a subtext to say not just the commemoration of Tutsi should matter to Rwandans.

In citizen-driven, online conversations and online radio programmes like those of Ikondera (an online news outlet critical of the government of Rwanda), critics of the Rwandan government (both Hutu and Tutsi exiles) applauded Mihigo for acknowledging other Rwandans who died and referring to them as relatives. He further asserted that these mostly Hutu victims of RPF crimes are in a better place than on earth (referring to heaven) or praying for all of us, just like genocide victims he sang about in other songs. Furthermore, those in exile approved of The Meaning of Death as they interpreted it as a deliberate critique of the Ndi Umunyarwanda programme introduced to all Rwandans. The programme argues that everyone is first and foremost Rwandan and minimizes the importance of Hutu, Tutsi and Twa identities; yet, it also insisted that Hutu – even those who did not participate in the genocide – should apologize for the actions of the Interahamwe and the pre-genocide army in 1994 (Mbaraga, 2013).

As soon as the song was released on YouTube on 6 April 2014, the song was banned in Rwanda. Kizito Mihigo subsequently disappeared from public, and his family reported him missing. Online sources and social media forums speculated about what had happened, but it was not until a report by BBC Great Lakes News in Kinyarwanda/Kirundi on 15 April that the public learned that police had arrested Mihigo with four others including a journalist of a Christian radio station (Kamo, 2014).

The news provoked many public discussions about his latest song and also provoked anger, especially from his fans. The police waited to confirm the news until after state-organized commemoration ceremonies had ended and foreign dignitaries had left Rwanda. His absence from official functions and the absence of his songs from all media stations during the 20th commemoration created suspicion that he had been killed or arrested. The police later explained that Mihigo had been arrested after investigations about him revealed he had been collaborating with opposition parties banned in Rwanda and was a threat to national security (Kamo, 2014). Although BBC and the Associated Press captured the importance of his arrest, there was no international outcry about his importance or his music, even though such an outcry is usually provoked when an opposition politician or human rights activist is arrested in Rwanda (Human Rights Watch, 2012).

However, when Mihigo finally appeared in court for his first hearing on 21 April that year to face terrorism charges, Jonathan Rosen, reporting on the trial for Al Jazeera America, commented, ‘The news of Mihigo’s charges was met with disbelief. Although high-profile arrests in Kagame’s Rwanda are not uncommon, suspects accused of such crimes are usually political or military figures, not artists preaching reconciliation and the gospel’. He continued to report on questions that were being raised in Rwanda:

from Kigali coffee shops to remote hilltop villages, residents, speaking in hushed tones, questioned the government’s official version of the past. Was Mihigo, a devout Catholic known for songs promoting healing and forgiveness, really in bed with those bent on instigating a new wave of violence? (Rosen, 2014)

A question then followed – as Rosen (2014) asked when police paraded the singer in front of media – ‘or could his arrest be linked to the lyrics of a song he had uploaded to YouTube, “Igisobanuro Cy’urupfu” (“The Meaning of Death”), in which he challenges the official narrative of the genocide?’ It is commonly believed among Rwandans that, given the previous support he received, the government, to protect itself against Mihigo’s opposition, had to turn him into a terrorist, ban all his songs, lower his public profile and, of course, disassociate itself from the message of The Meaning of Death. Mihigo pleaded guilty and requested forgiveness: ‘I stand before this court to declare that I am guilty and I seek for forgiveness like I have done from day one’, (Kagire and Mbaraga, 2014). In the days that followed, Mihigo’s art was banned in Rwanda, never to be played again on public radio or television.
The government’s treatment of Mihigo after the release of The Meaning of Death for the 20th commemoration shows that the official memory narrative was to be protected regardless of who attempted to question it. This experience demonstrates how debates and reflections are limited within the confines of the official narrative. In this case, laws were used to punish Mihigo on terrorism charges. Moreover, all memory institutions and government and private organizations that he worked with distanced themselves from his work and removed him from their archives. In addition, he was restricted from accessing memorials and using materials of memory associated with the genocide. Finally, his art was banned from official commemorations and from being played countrywide, and the government’s media disseminated the message of his disgrace.

It remains unknown whether his last song was out of conviction and views he had all along, or whether it was related to the feedback he received from fans and critics who disagreed with his previous lyrics that supported the official genocide narrative. Perhaps it was his own internal thought process that led him to change his message in his publicly aired controversial song on the meaning of death. As Maurice Halbwachs (1992) famously commented on the tension between individual and collective memory, ‘one may say that the individual remembers by placing himself in the perspective of a group, but [it is also true that] the memory of the group realizes and manifests itself in individual memories’ (p. 40).

Following his arrest, other prominent Rwandan musicians started speaking out and distancing themselves from Mihigo, both as a person and an artist. A journalist from the government-run online newspaper the New Times interviewed famous singers who criticized and rebuked Mihigo. Eric Senderi, who is famous for singing pro-government songs, used Mihigo’s action to argue how unthankful some Tutsi survivors are:

Actually, speaking as a former soldier, this shows that even though some people were rescued (during the Genocide) they don’t know what the people who rescued them went through to save them, the sacrifices they had to make, the blood they poured and the different disabilities they have endured. (Karemera, 2014)

Others, like Diane Teta, linked him to past musicians like Simon Bikindi, who had used his music for evil. She was quoted saying, ‘It is a shame that some people still want to use music as a platform to indulge in illegal activities. We had musicians who recorded genocide inciting songs which helped destroy this country’ (Karemera, 2014). The musicians’ comments, and more specifically Teta’s, alluded to The Meaning of Death. This, for many, revealed that it was not really about his crime as an alleged terrorist, but confirmed what was on many Rwandans’ minds: that the reasons for his arrest, even if they included terrorism, could not be delinked from the counternarrative in his song on the equality of all kinds of death. The song came out when I had already concluded my fieldwork, and I was not able to do further interviews. But by looking at the sentiments above and the online reaction, the song appeared to receive a lot of attention and was discussed in different media both in and outside of Rwanda. For example, 1 year after his music was banned, Igisobamuro Cy’Urupfu was played more than 220,000 times on YouTube, which is 150,000 more views than before his sentence, and views for his Amateka went from 100,000 to 230,000. Most of his songs continue to have well over 200,000 views via YouTube.

**The significance of Mihigo’s music**

The works of Kizito Mihigo and other artists have shaped conversations and individual reflections on genocide memory among Rwandans. They have also influenced individuals to come to terms with their singular and collective pasts as well as shaped conversations around healing, reconciliation and nation-building. First, artists have explained that creating music influenced their own healing process. Second, as my interviewees explained, Mihigo’s art shaped both their experiences of commemoration and those of society at large.
In analysing Mihigo’s relationship to Fifi, Mutoni and Theoneste’s interviews, as well as other media personalities and Mihigo’s comments during concerts, it is evident that the artist’s own works on memory have transformed Rwandans. During his Hotel Serena concert in 2012, as his song *Amateka* gained popularity, Mihigo asserted that through composing some of his commemoration music in Belgium, he was inspired to search for and reconcile with Fifi. In reference to his reconciliation process with Fifi, he reflected that music helped him to slowly become a lovable person. When Mihigo first released *Amateka* in April 2011, it was widely played on radio, in public spaces like taxi parks countrywide and in homes, and as a result, the song became popular among Rwandans, as did the artist. It has been argued that music allows both the singer and listeners to express their emotions about the past (Bergh and Sloboda, 2010). As is increasingly observed in the literature, music shares emotions verbally and non-verbally, which is crucial for healing and restoring relationships (Bergh and Sloboda, 2010). These expressions were evident at Kizito Mihigo’s emotional concerts and public performances such as at Kigali’s Amahoro Stadium in 2012 during the commemoration ceremony. Kizito Mihigo went on stage and as soon as he started singing *Amateka* a woman sitting next to me started to cry. Her non-verbal expression was matched by those who cried aloud and were carried out by ambulances.

Likewise, that April, Mutoni, a university student I spoke with, was in the market and found herself singing the lyrics as the song played loudly. As she later told me in an interview, ‘the song was especially captivating in its opening lines’. She described them as powerful and attractive for an audience that was in a mourning mood. The song starts with a liturgical kind of rhythm and a calm sound; then, Mihigo begins to sing softly and one feels compelled to join in. She pointed to the song’s opening lines, ‘Rwanda my mother let me console you … that’s why I was born and you brought me up’. The song calls upon every listener, like Mutoni, in public and private places, to remember the period they are in and to comfort the ‘mother’, symbolizing the motherland. Being Rwandan is itself framed as a unifying factor, and all listeners – Hutu, Tutsi and Twa – are invited to belong, and therefore, participate and remember together. Mutoni, who before listening to Mihigo’s music described herself in terms that could best be described as someone who did not participate in commemoration, further explained,

> For me, listening to *Amateka* the first time, I felt like I had finally found a language to express the loss of my mother. I played it every time. My friends and I also listened to it together if one of us was having traumatic symptoms. We were encouraged because the song encouraged us not to ignore our history and was empowering in many ways because we could also reflect on a good future ahead of us. (Interview with Mutoni, Kigali, June 2011)

Sturken (1997) reminds us that ‘when personal memories of public events are shared’, like those in Mihigo’s songs, ‘their meaning changes’ (p. 3). The songs have acquired a new meaning for Mutoni as they did for perpetrators and survivors alike and for Rwandans and non-Rwandans who listen to Mihigo’s songs.

Yet, the song goes beyond what Mutoni and Fifi and many other survivors referred to as comforting rhythm and lyrics; it engages difficult and sensitive questions publicly that are pertinent to larger social conversations and focus on what is not remembered in state-organized memory. *Amateka*, for example, allowed people to discuss why there had been a shift between calling the massacres of 1994 ‘the Rwandan genocide’ and calling them ‘the genocide against the Tutsi’. *Amateka* provoked listeners with its bridge: ‘Twibuke Jenoside yakorewe Abatutsi’ (‘We remember the genocide against the Tutsi’). It touched on the changes instituted in 2013 to call it a genocide against the Tutsi and not just the ‘Rwandan Genocide’. It started with a commemoration theme in April 2011 that emphasized the question of who was being remembered (Tumwebaze, 2017). However, in response to those who
criticized its focus on Tutsi survivors only, Mihigo explained at the concert in 2012 that the term ‘genocide against the Tutsi’ itself was meant to emphasize and clarify who was targeted in the genocide even though he recognizes that non-Tutsi in that same genocide were also killed and are therefore remembered. The choice of language sought to distinguish the genocide memory from memories of civil wars and other killings of Rwandans in the 1990s.

Similarly, the line ‘Imyaka ibaye cumi n’irindwi twibuka’ (‘It’s been seventeen years remembering’) released in 2011 emphasized the ‘how long’ question and affirmed that this had become a cultural tradition for the past 17 years. However, as one of my interviewees explained, this opened debate between those who disagree with the official narrative and those who are active in planning it, both of whom asked how long the remembering ritual would last. As if he had listened to his audience discussing these matters, Mihigo addressed this issue at the concert in 2012, reintroducing the song with the 17-year emphasis removed and replacing that reference with ‘as remembrance and time passes’. This was to emphasize and affirm that the genocide commemoration did not have a specific end time. In this way, his music connected and brought Rwandans together to share in new experiences of commemoration, but it also connected him as an artist to the larger Rwandan community. As Dijck (2006) argues, ‘shared listening, exchanging (recorded) songs, and talking about music create a sense of belonging, and connect a person’s sense of self to a larger community and generation’ (p. 357). But it also opens up either the artist or the listener to another’s truth and narrative as they remember theirs (García, 2014). In the process of composing his music and performing both in Rwanda and the diaspora, Mihigo learned of other narratives, including those he included in Igisobanuro Cy’urupfu. Mihigo’s participation in earlier commemorations was political, even though he was toeing the party line; he just became explicitly politicized after he went off on his own. Regardless of his intentions, Mihigo was involved in the shifting power dynamics around genocide memory – it was only when his music challenged those in power on behalf of the marginalized and forgotten that the fault lines became clear.

Before his work was banned in Rwanda, Mihigo featured in national media engaging students in secondary schools and prisons, and he held a debate on national public television and radio and other public forums through his Kizito Mihigo Peace Foundation, founded in 2010. Consequently, his works influenced and structured memory in different communities, especially among young people he met in secondary schools and prisoners, as he toured both schools and prisons often. His work received support from the US Embassy in Kigali, World Vision International and The Government of Rwanda. He won awards from the Imbuto Foundation and the Rwanda Governance Board for promoting good governance. The question that now arises is, ‘Will his music continue to influence commemoration or will people listen to it privately?’ and ‘How the lyrics will continue to shape commemorations in Rwanda?’ However, as seductive as the notion may be, the mythology of a therapeutic art transcending political division and palliating the traumatized has certainly not been the universal experience in Rwanda – nor would Mihigo subscribe to such pretensions.

Conclusion

As I have argued, after the genocide ended, Rwandans had to make sense of the past. The new government embarked on a process to create an official narrative of the past for reconciliation, educating future generations and to fight denialism and remember the victims of the 1994 genocide. Yet, as it has been noted, the process was complex and political as is the case in other post-conflict countries. The state-organized mechanisms of memorials and annual commemoration events have evolved to create a new intense culture of mourning that is institutionalized and systematized in post-genocide Rwanda. As Helen Hintjens (2008) has written regarding Rwanda’s post-genocide environment, ‘as always, real life is far more complex, than the tidy logic of
political ideology can recognize’ (p. 32). These complexities are evident especially when Mihigo’s music later advocated for the inclusion of other forgotten victims into the official narrative of the genocide.

This article finds that in post-genocide and post-conflict societies, both state-organized and citizen-driven avenues of expressing memory are politicized when it concerns creating a shared memory of a violent past. Kizito Mihigo’s case shows that citizens of those societies can use music as a powerful tool to challenge the official narrative that is often selective and tends to favour political elites that often seek to control both state-organized and citizen-driven mechanisms of creating a shared history.

However, in societies where citizens are continuously negotiating competing versions of the past, the musician sometimes has to navigate and adapt their own experiences in a shrinking public space or choose to compete with the official discourse which results in consequences including imprisonment or sometimes even death. In most cases, the elites succeed in the short term in limiting production of new music or limiting the artist; however, because music is powerful it remains in the public psyche to speak to individual hearts. Researchers will need to examine the influence of music and musicians in the age of new media, as YouTube and other online music platforms continue to evolve and become more accessible even in post-conflict societies.

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Note

1. Kizito Mihigo was released on a Presidential Order of Mercy approved by a Rwandan government cabinet meeting on 14 September 2018, along with 2140 other prisoners including the opposition leader Victoire Ingabire whose case is also discussed in this article on pages 6 to 7.

References


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