Twelve years after the 1994 genocide, Rwanda remains a beautiful but wounded nation. It is largely a nation of genocide survivors, of past perpetrators of genocide, and of former refugees. Significantly, it is also a nation full of hope—one comprised of incredibly resilient people working to rebuild a nation that was largely destroyed, when 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus were murdered in some 90 days during what is known as the machete genocide. Tutsi rebels were able to end the killing spree when they overthrew the extremist Hutu government, but then hundreds of thousands of Hutus fled their homes, fearing reprisal.

I visited Rwanda in my capacity as a scholar of genocide studies, from mid-March to early April of 2006, as a guest of the National University of Rwanda. I met with Professor Anastase Shyaka, director of the university’s Centre for Conflict Management, who described how the country had been forced to begin anew in the aftermath of the genocide:

When Hutus fled the cities and villages they took, stole, everything they could and carried it off—coffee, cars, clothes, all the money in the banks, food, everything. The towns and villages were totally cleaned out, and when Tutsi survivors returned, they had to start from scratch. The only people who had cars were...
NGOs (non governmental organizations); no government officials, not even government ministers [had cars], they all had to walk to work. Not even notepads for them to write on were available—not even pencils.

Shyaka and Major-General Karenzi Karake, a revered soldier who led the Rwandan Patriotic Forces in ousting the government in 1994, gave me invaluable assistance and provided me with opportunities to visit several genocide memorial sites, attend two gacaca meetings (pronounced ga cha-cha, these traditional village assemblies have been instituted to try alleged perpetrators), and view recently discovered or disinterred bodies and skeletons of victims. They also arranged a series of meetings with members of the National Gacaca Commission, the Unity and Reconciliation Commission, the National Association of Widows of Genocide, the Association of Student Survivors of Genocide, the student-run organization “Never Again,” and the Rwandan military.

As soon as I landed in Kigali, the capital of Rwanda, I was escorted by a researcher with the Centre for Conflict Management and by a young captain in the Rwandan military to Kigali’s genocide memorial. The memorial site, situated on a hillside above a small community of wooden shanties, encompasses meticulously manicured grounds, expanses of closely mown lawns, lush trees and bushes, and two modern, elegant buildings. Amidst the park-like setting were large flat, cement tombs holding the skeletons of hundreds of genocide victims. As we approached the tombs, our guide signaled two young men to remove the heavy lid of one tomb, exposing the bulk of bones encased therein. The guide told us that the skeletons and bones belonged to individuals slain in and around Kigali during the genocidal period. “As skeletons of those who were murdered continue to be found in this area, they are first cleaned and then brought here for proper burial,” he said.

The museum on the memorial grounds is comprised of three distinct sections: (1) a history of the Rwandan genocide; (2) a history of genocide in the twentieth century; and (3) photographs of some of the hundreds of thousands of children and teenagers who were murdered during the Rwandan genocide.

The first section provides a solid overview of Rwanda’s history, addressing the following periods: pre-colonial, colonial, post-colonial, pre-genocidal (early 1990s), genocidal (1994), and post-genocidal (late 1994 to 2000). It also includes a large room lined with glass cases filled with human skulls. It was both a stark and shocking exhibit—one that would never confront a visitor to a genocide-related museum in the United States. While some consider such an exhibit inappropriately gory, the room full of skulls constitutes “a set of artifacts” that forces viewers to confront the absolute horror of genocide. The crushed or punctured skulls of infants, children, and adults, are indeed chilling.

The second section provides a succinct history of genocides in the twentieth century, a brief tutorial for the uninformed. I found it admirable that a memorial for a specific genocide set out to educate its patrons about other genocides, and thus commemorate such events. In that regard, the genocide memorial in Kigali is a model of sorts for other genocide museums or memorials around the world.

I found the last section the most heart wrenching. In addition to snapshots of thousands of young victims, there were...
also life-size photographs of young people—primary school age children (5-12) and young teenagers (13-17)—accompanyed by captions that detailed the youth’s name, birth date, favorite food, favorite drink, favorite person, and sometimes his or her goals or last words. The very last piece of information succinctly states how the youngster had been murdered. To look at the photo of each beautiful child (all of which seemed to have been taken during moments of joy) and then read the captions was shattering. Knowing that the reason such innocent babes were brutally slain was because of their ethnicity was so overwhelming that I could not push myself to continue through the exhibit. It was the first time in all the visits I have made to genocide memorials and sites—including those in Jerusalem, Israel; the United States; Yerevan, Armenia; Deir Zor, Syria; Berlin, Germany; Sarajevo, Bosnia; and Srebrenica, Serbia—that I was almost paralyzed by the sadness that engulfed me.

Among the photographs was one of a little fellow named Patrick, who was about three years old and dressed in a one-piece outfit and tiny toddler shoes. In the photo, Patrick, with a big smile and bright cheerful eyes, is running towards something (perhaps his mother, grandparent, or possibly his sister). The caption read as follows:

Favorite sport: Riding bicycle
Favorite foods: chips, meat, and eggs
Best friend: Allane, his sister
Behavior: A quiet, well-behaved boy
Cause of death: Hacked by machete

Not far from Patrick’s was a photo of Hubert, a toddler who looked towards the camera with a serious face as he held onto a bicycle frame that rested against a thatched wall. The caption beneath his photograph also described his likes and his cause of death.

Age: 2
Favorite toy: Car
Favorite food: Rice with sauce
Favorite person: His sister

Last memory: Saw his mom dying
Cause of death: Shot dead

Even now, as I look at the photos I took of these photographs and write out the above captions, I get chills again. Mixed with the sorrow, I feel deep anger that these children and their loved ones were subjected to such brutality and horror.

On the second day of my visit, I attended a gacaca in Kigali. (A half week later, I attended another one in the town of Butare.) Originally, gacacas were a nineteenth century precolonial legal approach that constituted “a traditional community conflict resolution system.” Based on a 1999 proposal for the establishment of “gacaca jurisdictions” and a series of discussions that involved various segments of Rwandan society, along with members of the international community, the Rwandan government passed, in March 2001, the “Gacaca law” which formalized the gacaca as a means for trying alleged perpetrators of the genocide.

There are several reasons why the gacacas were reintroduced in Rwanda. First, there were so many alleged perpetrators in jail (approximately 130,000 in 1999) that there was no way the Rwandan national courts and the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (the two venues available in 1999) could try all the defendants. Even now, with three venues in place, it is estimated that it would take at least 100 years to try all 100,000 of the accused. But the sheer number of defendants was not the only problem facing Rwanda’s judicial system. In the aftermath of the genocide, the judicial system, along with just about everything else in Rwandan society, had been decimated. More specifically, almost all of the judges, lawyers, and court personnel had been slain during the genocide. As a result, the Rwandan legal system had to be reconstituted from the bottom up. A third rationale for the establishment of the gacaca was that the Rwandan government wanted to use the process as a means of reconciliation. That is, officials hoped that by allowing everyone to have their say and participate in the process of finding a defendant guilty or of exonerating him or her, that this would serve as a healing process.

“Survivors today are living among those who are likely to have killed [the survivors’] family members. That’s what we’re facing in this country,” said Charles Kabonero, a Kigali-based journalist and editor of Umuseso, a Rwandan language independent weekly. We were discussing the aftermath of the genocide at Hotel Chez Londo, a restaurant often frequented by Rwandan journalists, NGO officials, and others.

While many Rwandans agree that the gacacas can and should serve as a road to reconciliation, many others are skeptical. Among some of the concerns I heard were the following: Will all of the witnesses truly be honest given that they still live among the alleged perpetrator’s family members? Will those witnesses who truly know what happened have the courage to stand up and tell the truth? Is the process thorough enough in its collection and analysis of the evidence to come to a reasoned verdict? Is it right to allow a perpetrator to have his or her sentence halved simply because he or she admits to killing someone during the genocide? In light of the fact that the people trying the cases are not trained lawyers, just how consistent will the application of law be throughout the country? Can reconciliation really take place when the victims are still mourning their dead and struggling over material losses (e.g., homes that were destroyed and incomes lost) while being forced to live among perpetrators of heinous crimes who have been released from prison after relatively short periods? and, Is it really likely that the gacaca will serve, as the government hopes, as a cathartic process for the witnesses and survivors?

During the course of a gacaca, a panel of “people of integrity” (members of the local community who have never been arrested and who are considered to be honest and fair by the general populace) serve as both judge and jury. The people of integrity have to swear that they will be nonpartisan during every hearing. The defendants are trucked from prison to
the gacaca location in the area where they are alleged to have committed atrocities. The judges and survivors listen to the prisoners and witnesses’ testimony and any additional evidence that is presented. At the end of each hearing (there is often more than one for each prisoner, as additional evidence or information often has to be collected) the people of integrity pronounce the verdict. There must be an agreement among a majority of the people of integrity for a verdict to be rendered.

Gacacas are held on different days of the week in different cities, towns, and villages (e.g., Sunday in Kigali and Wednesday in Butare). When the gacacas meet on the designated day, all of the adults in the area are mandated by law to attend. To enable everyone to attend, all businesses are closed from 8 a.m. to noon.

The gacaca I attended in Kigali was on the outskirts of town, up a bumpy dirt road that led high up a hill. Shortly after we pulled up to the site—a small building in front of a series of benches carved from logs, sheltered from the sun by a wooden canopy—two prisoners in starched pink shirts (the color of all prison uniforms in Rwanda) and long, pink, basketball-type shorts, arrived in the back of an army truck. Guarded by a soldier with a semi-automatic rifle, the prisoners were escorted to a front row bench. Sitting at a long table were seven people of integrity, each of whom wore a sash with the word “Integrity” written in all capitals in Rwanda’s principal language, Kinyarwanda.

Both of the prisoners were in their late twenties and both had been in jail for about 10 years. During the first hearing, an older woman, a witness, spoke on behalf of the young man on trial. She testified that the young man was a neighbor of hers and that she knew he had not been involved in any criminal activity during the genocide. The judges asked her a series of questions, all in Kinyarwanda, and then asked the young man a series of questions. I was told that the judges were checking the answers of the witness and the defendant against the evidence collected by the gacaca commission. This was the third or fourth hearing for the young man. After the first hearing, the people of integrity took up the second case, following the same line of questioning. After the questioning period, the judges temporarily adjourned the meeting and entered the adjacent building to confer.

After about 20 minutes, the general meeting was reconvened and both men were “immediately” released from prison. They were not declared innocent, but because the witnesses who had made accusations against the defendants had failed to show up and testify, and since the examination of evidence collected by the gacaca commission had not identified either of the defendants as having actually been at the scene of the alleged crimes, they were released. One young man’s mother, wife, and children were in attendance, and they raced to hug him. The other young man stood alone, waiting for a ride back down the hill so he could change out of his pink prison uniform and reenter society.

Several days later, following a two-day workshop on comparative genocide that I gave at the university’s Centre for Conflict Management for college and faculty members from around the country, I was driven out into the local countryside to a cooperative established by Tutsi and Hutu widows. Upon our arrival, one of the members gave us a tour of the facilities. While the buildings were worn, even shabby, and the grounds not more than a sloping hill, what was taking place in such a modest setting was remarkable. We were shown a wood yard where survivors were making tables, chairs, and bee hives to sell to honey producers; a computer lab where orphans were learning computer skills; a sewing room filled with a dozen Chinese government-donated antiquated sewing machines with foot pedals, with which students were learning how to design and make clothes, for their own use as well as to sell; a shed filled with cases of beer and soft drinks, which served as a distribution center for the local area; a plot of land where the members grew their own food; a huge pig sty in which dozens of pigs were being raised and ultimately given to women in the cooperative; and an area where chicken coops were being built so the cooperative could raise chickens, sell eggs, and provide community members with their own chickens.

Possibly the most astonishing aspect of the cooperative was that it was established by one woman who acquired some
land from the post-genocidal government and, with some help, built one housing unit after another prior to establishing the cooperative itself. The cooperative’s name in Kinyarwanda means “leaning on one another.” The woman who showed us around told us that when the women first came together to form the cooperative, they did not look at each other as Tutsi or Hutu, but as women who had lost their husbands, and they viewed the children simply as children who had lost their families.

A day later, after a talk I gave to some 200 students and faculty members on the Darfur genocide, I was invited to visit a site where 35 bodies had recently been disinterred. We drove out of Butare and up a winding, deeply rutted, dirt road that passed numerous small villages of mud-walled houses with corrugated tin roofs. After several kilometers, we pulled up to a large, dirt square. Alongside the square, were several structures belonging to a primary school and a public building that appeared to be a warehouse. A local administrator came and unlocked a door to the warehouse. He escorted us into a dark room, where we were overcome by an overwhelming stench.

The official informed us that we would be viewing the remains of some of the 180 people in the area who had been killed during the genocide. He then bent down and yanked several gunnysack-like plastic bags from atop the mass of tangled bones, crushed skulls, and shreds of bloodstained clothing. At first, the pile of bones and clothing looked like a mass of glutinous material, and it was difficult to discern what we were viewing; but upon closer scrutiny, one could make out different shaped bones, caved in skulls, jaw bones with some teeth intact, and patches of hair on skulls. In hushed voices, we each began tentatively to point out full skulls, slashes on bones, crushed foreheads, a child’s frock, and a single shoe.

The official told us that the remains had recently been discovered in a nearby village, behind a house, where a man had started to dig a latrine. As the man dug into the soil, he discovered, to his horror, several skeletons barely two feet below the surface—an area where he had previously grown vegetables for his family.

The official explained that the bones were going to be washed and covered with lime so they would not smell and then buried in a special cemetery for genocide victims. During his explanation, I spotted a couple dozen young children peeking in the windows from outside, staring at us. (One of the young men accompanying me—whose left arm was hacked off during the brutality that preceded the actual genocide—later told me he had asked the children if they knew what we were looking at, and they said “no.” He then asked if they knew what “genocide” was, and they all claimed that they didn’t.)

On our way to the site where the remains had been disinterred, we passed the cemetery. It consisted of a neatly painted fence surrounding a carefully cared for area of graves. The arch above the entrance to the cemetery read, in Kinyarwanda: “Memorial of Victims of Genocide, Cyarwa, 1994. We will always remember you.”

The site of the disinterment was a simple wooden house along a dirt road.
Several long planks partially covered a deep hole, some 12 meters deep. The official told us that after the current owner of the house had discovered the initial bodies (the previous occupants had ostensibly been murdered during the genocide), several locals who deal with such discoveries came and raised the skeletons from the ground and carted them to the warehouse.

The fact is that some 12 years after the genocide such finds are relatively common. There are literally thousands—and, in all likelihood, tens of thousands—of victims’ remains that have yet to be found. Thousands of survivors still have not had the chance to properly bury their loved ones, and thus have not been able to gain a modicum of closure. This means that entire communities continue to experience the raw emotions dredged up by such grisly scenes. With each find, people are forced to relive the horrors of the genocide; and there is no telling what the ramifications are in regard to the government’s efforts to bring about reconciliation.

Midway through my stay in Rwanda, Major-General Karake arranged for me to visit a memorial site in a place called Murambi. Since special permission was needed to visit the site, Karake called ahead and asked the commandant (one of Karake’s colonels) of the sector to escort me to the memorial. Once at the site, the coordinator of the museum, an old man (who I at first assumed was the caretaker of the grounds), the executive secretary of the sector (who had heard we were coming for a visit), the colonel, and a soldier with an automatic weapon, who patrolled about 200 yards ahead of us, immediately headed down a hill towards seven or eight brick bungalows. As we walked along and talked, I periodically noticed a machete in the grass—examples, I assumed, of the weapons that were used to carry out the genocide.

Prior to the genocide the bungalows were intended to serve as a school; as a result, each was comprised of five classrooms. As we entered the first room of the first bungalow, we were confronted by rows of skeletons of varying sizes laid out side-by-side on platforms. The skeletons had been covered with lime to prevent them from decaying and possibly from smelling worse than they did. The stench was again overwhelming. Some of the skeletons’ arms reached out as if attempting to protect themselves; others were in fetal positions, as if attempting to make themselves as small as possible; still others held their arms and hands over their faces, perhaps in an attempt to ward off blows to the heads. Many skeletons, especially those of babies, and there were a great number of them, had huge chunks of their skulls missing. Numerous other skeletons (those of adults, children, and babies) had deep gashes in their skulls and other parts of their bodies.

Altogether, there must have been 35 to 40 rooms filled with skeletons. In the other rooms, some of the skeletons had beads around their necks. My escorts pointed out that these women were most likely nuns. Still others had fragments of clothing wrapped around parts of their bodies, and some still had patches of hair on their heads.

After walking through eight or nine rooms, we headed up the hill towards the museum and stopped at a huge shed which contained two long clotheslines of ragged clothes that had been removed from some of the 50,000 people murdered on the mountainsides, valleys, and homes in that area. The coordinator of the museum told me that during the genocide, many people from far away towns and villages had been assured by various people, including some priests, that they could seek sanctuary in and around Murambi, but this had been a ploy. Once tens of thousands of people arrived seeking refuge, the area quickly became a place of slaughter.

Like the museum in Kigali, the one in Murambi provided a history of Rwanda and of the genocide. The museum in Murambi, however, focused solely on the Rwandan genocide and only included photographs of men, women, and children who had been murdered in and around Murambi. After viewing the exhibits, we entered a large room filled with photographs of victims taken

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prior to their murders. One entire wall included life-size photographs of eight people: a woman, five children and two of the children’s cousins. That was when the museum coordinator told me that these eight people were the family of the elderly man who had been following us from room to room. When I turned to speak to the old man, he was staring sadly at his wife, children, and nephews.

The coordinator said that after the genocide the man had spent every day, from dawn to dusk, at the museum helping out however he could. Once outside, I mustered the nerve to ask the old man, through an interpreter, how he could bear to be at the museum day-in and day-out. He said, “This is the only place I do not feel alone. Inside with the bones is the only time I feel solace.” It was one of the most devastating things I heard while in Rwanda.

Towards the end of my stay, I met up with Bertrand, the brother of Rafiki, a young man I had met in Sarajevo during the tenth anniversary of the 1995 genocide perpetrated at Srebrenica. When I informed Rafiki, who resides in Sweden and who is studying to become a genocide scholar, that I was planning a trip to Rwanda, he expressed hope that I could visit his family. After meeting Rafiki’s family, I hiked back up the deep canyon, which was covered with banana plants and small family farms, to the dirt road where we had parked our vehicle. There, Bertrand told me that during the genocide the Hutus had decimated all the homes of the Tutsis in the valley above and below us.

He also told me that his family had lost 10 members—aunts, uncles, and cousins—all of who lived in the valley we were now standing above. He said that his immediate family was only saved because Rafiki, who was studying at a Jesuit monastery in the hopes of becoming a priest, sent for them and helped them seek sanctuary in a church. Bertrand said that the church in which they sought safety was packed wall-to-wall with people, and they remained in the church for three weeks during which the perpetrators terrorized everyone by pulling people out every day to murder them. His father was dragged out but managed to escape. Ever since then, Bertrand said, his parents and his older sister have not been the same. All are badly depressed, and his sister breaks into tears periodically, crying that “they”—the perpetrators—are coming to kill her.

Despite their traumatic experience, the family had greeted me, a stranger, warmly and welcomed me as a member of the family. Nearly destitute, they cannot afford to send their third oldest son, David, to college. Such a lack of opportunity makes the future look rather bleak for him. But instead of bemoaning his situation, he has spent the past several years, while helping out on the family’s small patch of land, writing two novels on the genocide. However, in Rwanda all publishers charge authors to have their books printed, and thus there is little chance that David’s work will reach a larger audience.
During the dozen or so meetings I had in Rwanda, I learned details of the genocide that I could never have obtained just by visiting memorial sites and museums, attending gacacas, or observing disinterment sites. Indeed, the personal meetings allowed me to broach questions and get detailed answers, to seek clarification, and to be introduced to various perspectives on different issues. I learned that every single Rwandan, whether he or she resided in Rwanda or not during the genocide, has been affected profoundly by the genocide. Those who had been in exile in Uganda, Kenya, Europe, or the United States, all lost family members or friends in the genocide. Many born after the genocide became members of fractured families—families who had either lost loved ones in the genocide or who have family members in prison accused of participating in the genocide. Still others born after the genocide were born into families in which mothers, fathers, sisters or brothers are still suffering post-traumatic stress and post-genocidal poverty due to having lost their livelihoods, homes, and material wealth. Not all fall into such categories, but few have been left untouched.

Despite its Herculean efforts to overcome the horrors of the past, Rwanda truly continues to be an open wound—the division and murderous rage have not totally dissipated. As one human rights worker with the organization Never Again-Rwanda, said, “If an extremist group began broadcasting propaganda again, and eventually called on their followers to kill again, many, I believe, would answer the call and do so.” I am not sure the world understands this reality, and as a result, Rwanda and its people continue to unduly suffer. After allowing Rwanda to be engulfed in the maw of the genocide in 1994, I believe that there is a moral imperative for the international community today to reach out to Rwanda and help this small, scarred nation regain stability and forge a better future for all its people.

Notes

2. “Rwanda: Accountability for War Crimes and Genocide,” United States Institute for Peace (1995), 9. Available at www.usip.org/pubs/specialreports/early/rwanda1.htm. The most senior members of the former government, military, and militias alleged to be responsible for the genocide are being tried in the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda; those who are suspected of having helped to plan the genocide (e.g., various colleagues and friends of the then president or political, economic, and military power-brokers) are being tried in Rwanda’s national courts; and the masses of suspects, including those who claim they were forced to kill, are being tried through gacacas.

Samuel Totten is a scholar of genocide studies at the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville. His latest book is Genocide in Darfur: An Investigation of Atrocities in the Sudan (New York: Routledge, forthcoming), co-edited with Eric Markusen. With William S. Parsons and Israel W. Charny, Totten also co-edited Century of Genocide: Critical Essays and Eyewitness Accounts (New York: Routledge, 2004). Among other books he has edited, co-edited, or written on genocide are Teaching about Genocide: Issues, Approaches, Resources; Pioneers of Genocide Studies; and First Person Accounts of Genocide Committed in the Twentieth Century: An Annotated Bibliography.