

## RESILIENCE IN SURVIVORS OF MASS VIOLENCE AND ITS CONTRIBUTION TO RECONCILIATION IN POST-CONFLICT RWANDA

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**Abstract:** This paper explores the concept of resilience in survivors of mass violence as a critical factor in promoting reconciliation in post-conflict Rwanda. It examines how people who have experienced untold atrocities in conflict continue to bounce back, live on, exude hope, and be productive in society. This is particularly intriguing when, as is the case in different programmes concerned with organizing and coordinating psychological interventions for the survivors, the attention is given to finding marks of trauma and dysfunction in the survivors.

The paper disputes the assumption that reactions to experiences of violence are entirely negative, and that they have to be dealt with in the conventional ways, usually Western-based, for healing and reconciliation to be realised. It cautions against applying Western standards to different ethnocultural contexts of recovery, and promotes the design of interventions that are supportive of the natural capacity for resilience in the survivors.

### BACKGROUND

The background of this paper is research I carried out in February 2010, for a study entitled “Psychological Counselling and Peacebuilding in Post-Conflict Societies: A Case Study of Rwanda”. In this study, I set out to investigate the actual state of affairs as regards the inclusion of psychological counselling in peacebuilding processes amongst the genocide survivors in Kigali, Rwanda, and to find out whether it could be said that the people were at peace: healed, reconciled, and living wholesomely. The assumption in this study was that Psychological Counselling was pivotal in the peacebuilding processes being employed in Rwanda, and needed to be given due consideration. Indeed, the study showed that Psychological Counselling played a major role in the reconstruction, restoration and reconciliation processes in the lives of the survivors, and did therefore contribute to the overall peacebuilding process.

Another theme however, rang subtly and insistently throughout the study: the theme of resilience. Amidst untold cruelty, pain and anguish experienced during the genocide, some survivors exuded extreme courage, fortitude, and resolve. They seemed not to bow down to the extremities of torture, and tended to cheat the certainty of destruction so very well. In the aftermath of the genocide, they seemed to bounce back and embrace life with all its positive possibilities. These are the subjects of my interest.

In this paper, I will examine this theme of resilience in the light of the other themes that emerged in the study. I will seek to show the importance of considering resilience in the design of interventions that will help bring peace to a nation as ravaged by conflict as Rwanda was. This exploration does not assume that ‘trauma’ and ‘resilience’ are at the two opposing

extreme ends of the same continuum, but rather that the concept of trauma as an outcome of the Rwandan genocide has been given a good deal of attention, which resilience has lacked.

**RESILIENCE: IS IT THE DEFAULT?**

Resilience has been defined as the ability to adjust to stress and to restore equilibrium when confronted with trauma, tragedy, and threat (Pfefferbaum et al, 2008). It is thought to arise from a combination of genetic, developmental and environmental factors. Studies in molecular genetics purport that genetic factors influence whether people experience Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) or not. In their ground-breaking study involving 424 Rwandan genocide survivors, Kolassa et al (2010) found that certain people, due to their genotype, were able to inactivate the stress neurotransmitters and thus did not develop stress-related problems, while others were less able to manipulate the transmitters, and so developed stress more easily.

The four major properties of resilience are robustness, redundancy, resourcefulness, and rapidity (Pfefferbaum et al, 2008). Pfefferbaum et al describe robustness as strength, ability to withstand stress without degradation or loss of function, evidenced in the intensity of connectedness and the extent of participation in activities and organizations. Redundancy is the ability to substitute elements, systems, and resources in terms of functional requirements. Resourcefulness is the ability to identify problems, formulate priorities, and creatively apply resources to achieve goals. Rapidity is the ability to address priorities and accomplish goals in a timely manner so as to contain losses and prevent future disruption.

Shalev and Errera (2008) refer to Bio-ecological studies as offering insights into understanding the meaning of resilience. In these studies, the term is used to address a living organism's 'successful survival of evolutionary pressures' by reorganizing itself, following adversity, without changing its functioning, structure, and identity. This reorganization involves adaptation, and transformability or the capacity to mutate into a new identity when required. These properties are akin to the physical property of material to 'return to its original shape or position after deformation that does not exceed its elastic limits' (p.153).

The concept of agency is crucial to resilience. The individual is an active agent in the adaptation process. The individual makes deliberate effort and certain choices in response to the adversity. Restoring the people's capacity to make choices in their lives is one key way of fostering resilience. Murphy (2006) emphasizes the importance of the concept of agency in fostering resilience. He argues that a belief in the effectiveness of agency entails a belief in the ability to predict the likely consequences of various actions, and hence the ability to pursue and realize ones goals. Resilient people are said to have an 'internal locus of control' – a sense of being able to affect their own destiny (Richters, 2010).

The question arises whether resilience should be considered the default in response to the tragedy that Rwanda experience in 1994. It is worth noting that this is not to say that resilience should be expected of the survivors, but rather to bring to attention reactions to the catastrophe that remain unexamined to a large extent. This inadequate attention to resilience has been occasioned by a tendency to pathologize the effects of the genocide, which has led to

allocating too much attention and too many resources to ‘therapeutic’ interventions based on a disease model (Shalev and Errera, 2008). Yoder (2005) also discusses the limitations of defining trauma through the PTSD frame, pointing out that there is a danger of pathologizing normal responses to traumatic situations. She notes that human beings are extremely resilient and generally cope well.

The view of resilience as the default is the assumption that human beings possess the innate capacity to recover from adversity (Shalev and Errera, 2008). This view encourages normal adaptation, and helps shape interventions in adversity to ones that identify, and practically address, the barriers to this adaptation. As Shalev and Errera point out, this approach accommodates the varying meanings of resilience to different people, at different times, and in different ways.

Golub’s (2000) study of the survivors of the Holocaust showed that many survivors have the will to regenerate themselves and live beyond their horrific pasts. They have been able to achieve a level of peace and an acceptance of life’s events, both positive and negative. Golub offers deep insight into the view of resilience as the default. She notes that while many researchers see resilience as a height of psychological health that cannot be expected in a severely traumatized person, “what could be realistically ‘expected’ of survivors of the Holocaust?” (p.2), or the Rwandan genocide for that matter?

Many survivors of the genocide in Rwanda have shown great resilience in the sense of an ability to ‘bounce back’ from great adversity. I proceed to examine the theme of resilience in the light of some of the themes that emerged in research carried out in 2010, and to show its contribution to reconciliation in Rwanda.

### **HEALING AND RECONCILIATION**

The term ‘healing and reconciliation’ has become an epitome of the responses to the 1994 genocide in Rwanda. A conversation is hardly complete without reference to healing and reconciliation amongst the survivors and perpetrators of the genocide. The term has actually become synonymous with any efforts towards handling the upshot of the genocide.

The term, however, does not mean that everyone as an individual needed to go through the process of healing in order to be fully reconciled with the other members of the society. It is, rather, an acknowledgement of the fact that genocide affected the whole nation as a people, and certain steps needed to be taken in order for people to live in harmony with each other and for peace to prevail. This means that each individual person, even when he/she does not necessarily carry the wounds of genocide, is cognizant of, and sympathetic to the process of restoring peace and harmony in the society. This collective acknowledgement and acceptance of the need for healing and reconciliation serves to fortify the people’s capacity to deal with the outcome of the genocide.

Reconciliation in contemporary discourse bears a similar connotation to how it is conceived and experienced in Rwanda, to a considerable degree. Hamber’s (2009) five stage model of

reconciliation consists of developing a shared vision, acknowledging and dealing with the past, building positive relationships, significant cultural and attitudinal change, and social, economic and political change. Lederach (1997) conceptualizes reconciliation as a blend of justice, mercy, truth and peace. Bloomfield (2006) sees reconciliation as ' a process of gradually rebuilding social relationships between communities alienated by sustained and widespread violence (p.12). These three models all point to the need for the collective acknowledgment and acceptance of the negative impact of mass violence as experienced in Rwanda, and the need for healing.

Traumatic events such as the Rwandan genocide overwhelm the ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection, and meaning (Herman,1997), and the goal of healing is to give the survivors a feeling that they have control over their lives again. Herman identifies three stages that trauma victims move through as part of the healing process: safety, acknowledgment, and reconnection (p.15). Healing programmes guided by these processes foster resilience in the survivors.

Herman further points out that each survivor must of necessity find his/her own way to restore the sense of connection with the wider community. Gacana (2008) traces his own journey of healing and identifies accepting of the past and seeking to release himself from its grip as the most difficult, yet most liberating, stage of the journey. Gacana deliberately decided to consciously pursue the liberation from the past by sharing his experiences with others and continuing to help them with their own feelings of sorrow and loss. This helped him be free from his own bondage of self-pity, sorrow, anger and hatred. He moved from fear to confidence, sorrow to joy, guilt and shame to acceptance of self and others, hatred to love, and from a desire for revenge to a commitment to help bring peace to his community (pp.154-155). Gacana's experience is representative of that of many Rwandans who made similar choices and portrayed great resilience in the wake of the genocide.

### **DEATH AND SURVIVAL**

A most recurrent theme as one listens to accounts of peoples' experiences during and after the genocide is the fact of 'losing everything'. Most of those who 'survived' the genocide lost everything. In essence, this makes the line between those who died and those who were left alive very thin indeed.

The idea of losing everything refers to far more than losing material possessions. It includes losing loved ones through brutal murder, in most cases witnessed by the so-called survivors. It encompasses the loss of lives of an entire community. But it entails still far more than that. It involves the loss of the very essence of life, as one of the child survivors of the genocide, who ended up being the head of her family (six younger brothers and sisters) at ten years of age, puts it.

The spirit, the very core, the real meaning of life, was killed among so many that 'survived' the genocide. There was no willingness to live anymore. In fact, many died as a result of having given up in life for this reason. Keane (1995), in the immediate aftermath of the genocide,

described Rwanda as ‘a country of corpses and orphans and terrible absences, where the spirit withered’ (p4).

For some however, that spirit, the essence of life, the very core, was revived and they bounced back to life. In certain instances, in spite of the destruction that seemed to annihilate all, a resolve was born, to live on, and be a source of livelihood and hope for others.

### **TRAUMA AND COUNSELLING**

The Rwandan genocide undoubtedly devastated people’s connection with each other, cast into doubt basic human relationships, and breached the attachments of community, a very key element of the Rwandan Society. In attempting to restore this sense of attachment, psychological interventions have been employed to varying degrees of success.

An overarching issue in the psychological treatment of trauma survivors in Rwanda is the employment of Western-based psychological models. Psychological counselling, especially the individual one-on-one model, is not at all entrenched in the culture of the Rwandan people. Like in many other African cultures, Rwandans prefer to handle their problems in groups and individual psychotherapy was unheard of traditionally.

World Vision has attempted to build on this fact by making use of group counselling in their Healing, Peacebuilding and Reconciliation (HPR) programme. Based on the concept of ‘community’ which is the bedrock of most African cultures, Rwanda inclusive, this type of counselling employs the idea of ‘sharing suffering’ and thus lightening the load and bringing healing to those affected. This phenomenon might, to some extent, explain some survivors’ capacity to ride through the most horrendous of violence and emerge seemingly unscathed. They had community and group support. They never were alone, but together as one, they faced whatever evil faced them. Their capacity for resilience was strengthened.

### **MASKS AND SANITY**

Denial of the actual sentiments and the deeply-sated emotions distinctly characterizes the Rwandan people’s reactions toward the genocide. These deep and real feelings are hidden under thick layered masks. The average Tutsi ‘survivor’ of the genocide will claim to harbor no hatred for the Hutus, to have no trouble forgiving, and to hold no grudge against anyone.

This masking of the real feelings was apparent in government efforts to quite some degree through encouraging confession at all costs, and giving less severe sentences to those who confessed. This was especially the case in the Gacaca courts, where those who did not openly ‘confess’ and their accusers who did not publicly ‘forgive’ were seen to be sabotaging the government policy of reconciliation.

The culture of masking true feelings is deeply entrenched in the Rwandan people’s tradition. It is seen as a demonstration of strength, a mark of pride and dignity. Indeed, numerous Kinyarwanda proverbs attest to this fact. These are a few of them:

1. *“Iyo umuntu aguhishe ko akwanga, umuhishako ubizi”* : If someone does not reveal that he hates you, do not reveal that you know he hates you.
2. *“Umurenzaho wera ibijumba”*: Even if it is covered up, it will still bear fruit (sweet potato).
3. *“Uhishe munda imbwa ntimwiba”*: If you hide something in you, a dog cannot take it away from you.

The value of dignity and pride of Rwanda permeates through to the conscience of the entire nation. Rwanda as a country, despite its pain, still strives to shine and hold its head high in the international face. This again is in keeping with the essence of the proverb, *“Imfura ishinjagira ishira”*: A noble man walks with his head high even when he is in pain. This explains the government’s endeavour to prioritize projects that make the country look good in the international arena, such as issues of development and economic independence, as well as overt efforts such as ensuring security and justice.

The masks, however, serve as a coping mechanism in dealing with the intensity of what the people suffered. They provide an escape from the immense pain and occur as the one logical way to keep sane and continue functioning in the midst of the horrifying aftermath of the genocide. Though it may be argued that the ‘appropriate’ way to deal with these intense effects of the genocide is through the acknowledgement, admission and consequent processing of the deep-seated emotions, the masks and layers may also be seen as a legitimate way of coping, and a means to build resilience in the aftermath of such great atrocities.

### **WOUNDED HEARTS AND FORGIVENESS**

Many hearts in Rwanda are still very deeply wounded, and many people harbor deep feelings of bitterness and resentment, either covertly or overtly, against those they believe were responsible for their debacle. In a sense, they feel justified to hold these strong feelings against their offenders, and consider that this is the only thing they can cling to against them. If they release this deep grudge, then it means the enemy is free altogether.

Gacana (2008) alludes to the complexity of the notion of forgiveness in the aftermath of the genocide, as he relates his own personal journey of meaning. He describes his realization of the fact that the benefits of the freedom gained through forgiveness are foremost his own. It helped him recover his lost humanity, his love of others and of himself. As he shared his pain, he regained a sense of inner peace and compassion.

Forgiveness has been hard in coming amongst the perpetrators and survivors of the genocide. And understandably so, for how do you ask and expect a person who witnessed his entire family being ruthlessly murdered to simply forgive and ‘let go’ of those he actually saw commit the evil? Accounts of survivors who miraculously survived, solely, from the attackers who killed their entire families as they watched are common. How do you ask one to just forgive those who he saw mercilessly raping his mother and then butchering her to death? Indeed, forgiveness is the most costly thing one can ask of a human being who experienced these atrocities, akin to ‘giving away a part of one’s own being’ as so aptly put by a survivor, a depth many people are not willing to go to.

When forgiveness has really happened amongst the genocide survivors and perpetrators, it has taken on a supernatural spiritual nature. It has taken place amongst those who have acknowledged that they cannot attain it by their own will and strength, and have allowed God to work in their hearts to enable them to reach to the point of forgiving through the Holy Spirit. It has taken workshops such as those organized by African Evangelistic Enterprise (AEE), to bring people to the point of realizing that an external power, in the person of Jesus Christ, is needed to bear their pain and carry the load they have been carrying, and give them opportunity to release this pain and burden to him. Those who have gone through this experience clearly exude the peace that comes with having been completely healed.

It is indeed really refreshing to encounter and interact with some of those who have had this experience, and are really at peace within. To listen to them narrate how they came to completely forgive those who had wiped out their entire families, and let go of all the bitterness and hatred, is akin to experiencing a gush of fresh cool waters in the desert heat of seeming hopelessness and depravity. To hear of their full acceptance of the perpetrators and total absence of any grudge against them after what they suffered is refreshingly striking.

There are stories of great victory in the face of cruel atrocities where groups refused to be identified as either Tutsi or Hutu, and suffered grave consequences, some even losing their lives. The survivors' response of forgiveness to the killers in these cases is indeed remarkable.

Some individual survivors have taken up leadership roles in the road to reconciliation, and individual accounts of what they suffered have taken on a deep, clear and honest acknowledgement of the unimaginable pain that millions of Rwandans went through, and the extremity of the cost of forgiveness. Their accounts transcend the concerns of the individual to those of an entire nation, and represent the earnest cry for the whole nation of Rwanda to be healed, reconciled, and restored to true peace.

It appears then, that Spirituality is very crucial in the design of interventions that will forge resilience and hence reconciliation and peace in Rwanda. Connor et al (2003) in a study evaluating the relationship between spirituality, resilience, anger and health status, show how a spiritual approach can be helpful in restoring hope, and acquiring a more balanced view about justice and injustice, safety and danger, good and evil. This can eventually lead to a greater sense of control, meaning and deeper intimacy, and thus buffer the effect of violent trauma.

#### **FRAGILE PEACE AND SOLID PEACE**

It clearly emerged that two types of peace are experienced in Rwanda today. Many people do not hesitate to describe Rwanda as a 'peaceful nation', yet in the same breath say that the people of Rwanda are 'not at peace'. When Rwanda is described as a peaceful nation, it basically means that justice and security have been insured to a great degree, and that there is 'peaceful cohabitation' amongst the Tutsi and the Hutu. It means that Rwanda is a safe place to live in, and that anyone is welcome especially to invest and contribute to the (economic) wellbeing of the country.

The latter form of peace can be described as ‘fragile peace’, fragile because it is constructed externally. However, it seems to form a structure for ‘solid’ peace. Arguably, it can be said that the government has taken pains to ensure that the structures are in place to support lasting peace in the nation. The external structure thus forms a basis for fostering resilience in the survivors of the genocide.

### **HOPE**

One of the crucial things that the genocide in Rwanda tended to destroy is the people’s sense of hope. Kantowitz and Riak (2008) point out that only hope for a brighter future can provide the necessary motivation for people to overcome critical limiting factors in their lives after traumatic events. Hope for the future relates to people’s perceptions of self, the past and the present, and whether past and present are seen only in negative terms, or as learning experiences or celebrations on the road to the future. Deliberate efforts that support the innate capacity of the people to forge forward despite adversity and obstacles must hence be made.

There is hope for Rwanda. The first ray of hope lies with the young people of this beautiful nation. Many of the Rwandan youth who are currently in the Universities and Secondary Schools were either very young or not born by the time of the genocide. This is a great advantage in the sense that they are arguably foreign to the culture that instigated the genocide and as such can be ambassadors of unity and peace amongst the people of Rwanda.

The second ray of hope lies with the church. The church can help a great deal in facilitating the inner healing of the people, thus ‘cleaning the mess from the bottom’ by preaching the ‘love your enemy’ message, much so by example. As already observed, the spiritual approach to the message of reconciliation and peace is most effective, and Rwanda being a predominantly Christian nation would be receptive to the same. Again, numerous efforts are being made by the church in Rwanda, even through government support, to ensure this.

The government, through the NURC, has in addition embraced the theme of hope, looking forward rather than to the past, specifically in the April 7<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> Genocide Memorial week. This means that the activities and speeches tend to focus more on where Rwanda is going from now henceforth, not so much on where it has come from. There is indeed hope for Rwanda.

### **CONCLUSION**

In this paper, I have examined the theme of resilience in the light of some of the themes that emerged in the study carried out in 2010 on the place of psychological counselling in the peacebuilding process in post-conflict Rwanda. I have defined resilience with reference to contemporary literature, and have sought to show the importance of considering resilience in the design of interventions that will help bring peace to Rwanda and other post-conflict societies.

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