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Life in the Aftermath of the 1994 Rwandan Genocide

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> *"The most rewarding aspect of my life is that I have children [two out of seven survived the genocide]. The worst is that I am a living shame [as a result of having been raped—five times by five different men—during the genocide]."*
>
> —a female survivor in her 50s

For six months in 2008, as a Fulbright Scholar, I served as a senior researcher at the Centre for Conflict Management at the National University of Rwanda where I conducted research into the lives of survivors of the 1994 genocide. The research comprised lengthy interviews (between seven and fifteen hours) with each survivor.[1] The findings are both telling and depressing.

In November 2006, *Social Education* published an article I wrote entitled "Rwanda: A Nation Resilient in the Aftermath of Genocide." Although accurate, it included lacunas that only become obvious when one probes deeply below the surface of Rwandan society today, some 15 years after the genocide. Such lacunas are not obvious when traveling the beautiful countryside taking in the scenery of tree-lined hills and cottages with tile roofs, or when speaking with friendly passersby as you wait for a bus, travel about, or walk down the street of any city, town or village. Yes, it is true, one certainly sees poverty: street children in ragged clothes, houses that we in the U.S. might consider sheds—with dirt floors, and lacking electricity or running water—but, for the most part, people *seem* upbeat.

Even at *gacaca* sessions (local hearings to try alleged perpetrators of atrocities in the vicinity), all appears to be, more or less, fine. Of course, the sadness on the faces of victims who testify is evident, and there are the worried countenances of the accused and their loved ones, but it appears, to the outsider, as if the truth is being deeply probed and impunity is being avoided. But below the surface, what one discovers is sometimes startling and, almost always, revelatory.

While conducting my research, I made a point of scratching below the surface. Way below it. During the course of the interviews, I posited 36 questions in an effort to obtain a detailed story of each survivor's life prior to, during, and following the 1994 genocide. (Between 500,000 to one million Tutsis and moderate Hutus were slain in a 100-day period, between April 6th and early July 1994.) The genocide was a low-tech affair, as hundreds of thousands of people were killed at the hands of machete-, spear-, and nail-studded club-wielding perpetrators. For that reason, the Rwandan genocide is frequently referred to as "the machete genocide."

Current Day Rwanda and Government Efforts

There are those who are highly critical of the current Rwandan government under President Paul Kagame, who was a general in the Rwandan Patriotic Forces (RPF), the rebel group that ousted the government of the *genocidaires* (perpetrators of genocide). Critics contend that there is severe censorship of the press and daily speech (particularly if it is critical of the current government); exclusion of Hutus from a fair share of influential civil or governmental positions; that the government is more authoritarian than democratic; and that there is a lack of honesty about what RPF troops did upon entering Rwanda following the genocide (such as carrying out retaliatory massacres against Hutus). Within each of these criticisms there is a skein of truth. However, without excusing the less than ideal policies or practices of the current government, the reality is that the country is still experiencing currents of "genocide ideology." The genocide ideology manifests itself in various ways: teachers singling out Tutsi students for ill-treatment, or teaching students hate-riddled history; former genocidaires on the outside of Rwanda accusing the current government of perpetrating its own genocide; extremist Hutus in the jungles of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), who periodically carry out attacks across the border into Rwanda, are purportedly inculcating their children with the vile propaganda that was used to vilify the Tutsis prior to the genocide in an attempt

Bouquets of flowers placed during commemorations and individual visits from survivors line the balcony of the Kamonyi Memorial Center, about 30 km south of Rwanda's capital.

(Photo by Samuel Totten)

to ready them to take Rwanda back for the Hutus. So, the new government of Rwanda does have its hands full trying to build a new nation from the ashes of genocide, create a genuinely democratic nation, and prevent the country from slipping back into internecine warfare. That said, if the Rwandan government would be more inclusive and provide more opportunities for Hutus to serve in positions of power as well as providing more freedom for all it peoples, some of the aforementioned criticism might dissipate over time.

It is also true that the government has been criticized for not doing enough for the survivors of the genocide—that the survivors have gotten lost in the shuffle to rebuild the country and its infrastructure and bring in big international donations so the government can attain its goal of making Rwanda an "information society" that depends on the brains and ingenuity of its people (particularly since Rwanda has no deposits of gold, oil, or other sought after resources). Nevertheless, the Rwandan government has been fairly proactive in its attempt to meet the many and serious (if not desperate) needs of survivors. It has, for example, implemented special programs that address the following needs (and more) of the victims:[2] school fees (Fonds National pour l'Assistance aux Rescapés du Génocide, FARG, or The Genocide Survivors Fund); student loans to cover university fees (Student Financing Agency for Rwanda or SFAR, which is available to students across the country, not just survivors); the erection of new houses for survivors (FARG); and national and local trials to try alleged perpetrators of genocide and help bring about reconciliation (classical courts and gacaca tribunals). (For a discussion of the gacaca process, see Samuel Totten, "Rwanda: A Nation Resilient in the Aftermath of Genocide," *Social Education* 70, no. 7.) In one way, what the current Rwandan government and the citizens of Rwanda have accomplished thus far is nothing short of astonishing. When one realizes that most of the buildings (both government buildings as well as homes) had been demolished, looted, or burned, and everything that was salvageable had been stolen by the fleeing Hutus, and that bodies were piled up all over the streets, in homes, latrines and banana and sorghum fields, what is now in place is miraculous.

That said, the problem is that many of the programs have either been underfunded or not well managed. As a result, many survivors in dire need of assistance—be it psychological counseling, funds for college, land to build a home, materials to build a house—have either not received enough or sustained help to gain a modicum of stability in their lives. Or, in some cases, when the help has been forthcoming, it has resulted in less than ideal circumstances (e.g., houses that collapsed after five years time or counselors who cause more grief than help due to lack of proper training). There are other problems as well that have not been adequately addressed—the aforementioned adversarial mindset by former Hutu extremists (frequently referred to as "genocide ideology" by the current Rwandan government) and ongoing threats and attacks (though attacks are far fewer than the threats) against Tutsis by former Hutu extremists (either the families of those alleged perpetrators currently in prison or former genocidaires who have served their prison sentence and are now free).

It is difficult to ascertain whether the government of Rwanda is cognizant of how bereft so many "survivors" feel. (I use quotations here to highlight the feeling by many that while their bodies still exist, in many respects, they feel dead.) If the government is cognizant, then it is guilty of looking the other way and not doing all it can to meet the needs of those who have largely lost everything but their physical lives to

the genocide.[3] If it isn't cognizant, then that is shameful, for it is not difficult to uncover this reality; indeed, if one pricks the memory of any survivor, a flood of painful stories cascade forth.

The Lives of the Survivors

I interviewed Rwandans from all walks of life (university researchers, university students, former businessmen, impoverished women residing next door to the families of the individuals who killed their loved ones, and unemployed orphans). The destitution and desolation of each person spoke volumes about what it means to have lived through a genocide and to reside in a post-genocide society.

As I listened to the painful stories and observed the interviewees' sorrowful countenances as they struggled with their memories, I was reminded of the words of a Holocaust survivor (a leader of the Warsaw Uprising) in the documentary film *Shoah*. The survivor, speaking to Claude Lanzmann, the producer, about what he continued to live with in the aftermath of the Holocaust, said, "If you could lick my heart it would poison you."

Among the host of challenges that interviewees spoke to me about were the desolating sadness and depression they continue to experience; ongoing poverty, "homelessness" and joblessness; their lack of trust in the efficacy of gacaca and their anger over impunity; fear over the resurfacing of "genocide ideology" in the nation's schools and villages; an ongoing sense of fear and a lack of safety; and being plagued by flashbacks. Excerpts from the interviews I conducted provide insight into what a representative group of survivors continues to face in the aftermath of the genocide.

Extreme sadness, depression, and a lack of hope are the daily companions of many survivors—particularly those who personally witnessed horrific events up close or lost most, if not all, of their family members. A female survivor in her mid-30s, who lost her entire family (mother, father, brothers, and sisters) reported the following:

> My aunt is traumatized as a result of the genocide. She had seven children and now she only has two. They were all killed, as was their father, her husband. She constantly cries and shouts a lot. The worst case we've seen was during a memorial service [when] she began shouting and crying and it sounded as if she thought the war was going on again. That day she got help from a trauma counselor, but the rest of the time she receives no help. Only when there are active signs of trauma [crying out in public, making incoherent sounds] can she get help. Other times, she can't get help because there are no signs. Crying is not enough of a sign. Besides she does not have enough money to go get help every time she cries.

A 26-year-old male survivor, who lost his mother and two brothers in the genocide (and whose father died shortly after the genocide), said:

> Before the 1990s I was happy, I led a normal life, enjoyed affection from my parents. I had a very nice life. I was blessed as I had my parents, my brothers and my extended family. Now, today, I feel sad. It's hard for me to cry when someone dies. When a friend's parent dies and they have one left, I think, not because I am mean or selfish, but I think, they are lucky.

A continued lack of housing for genocide survivors. During the genocide, many homes and buildings were either destroyed outright or dismantled piece by piece as Hutus fled to the Congo or Burundi to escape approaching Tutsi rebels. Although the current Rwandan government has promised to provide survivors with their own homes, it is now 15 years on and many survivors continue to wait for the promise to be honored. A woman who lost her husband and five of her seven children and has moved from place to place because her home was destroyed during the genocide, said:

> FARG [the umbrella group for all survivor organizations in Rwanda] has built 100 houses [nearby], but those houses have no toilets and no kitchens. The contractor who built the houses was corrupt and stole the money and didn't complete the houses. And besides that, about 200 more houses are needed here. FARG forgets that life doesn't stop with physically surviving in '94.

A lack of decent paying jobs. After graduating from college and searching for a job for the last three years, one 26-year-old survivor has all but given up hope:

> For a whole year, I would buy newspapers twice a week looking for jobs, spending money on application letters. I've applied for so many jobs—more than 100—I've quit counting. I'd apply for five jobs a week. Whenever I came across a position related in any way to my [discipline], I'd apply…. I even went to banks to see about getting a loan so I could begin my own business, but they wouldn't give me a loan because I didn't have a steady job…. In this society, you need to know someone who can help you. I am an orphan. I am all alone. I have no one … who can help me.

The value of gacaca. While many survivors perceive gacaca as being extremely positive in that it helps to end impunity, assists families in locating loved ones' remains (often down deep latrines), and lends itself to the possibility of reconciliation between victims' families and their killers, some have little to no faith in gacaca. As for

his perspective on gacaca, the orphan in his 20s commented bitterly:

> Yes, the perpetrators provide some information about the genocide at gacaca, but just bits and pieces. They don't tell the whole truth. And when survivors testify, what comes of it? Nothing, really, as far as I can see. This past year alone over 100 survivors have been killed—just because of testifying [in gacaca]. The government says it will protect us, but it doesn't. You're only safe when you're dead. … If you have a strong and big family around, and you testify at gacaca where your testimony sends someone back to prison for a long time, you may be safe. But if you are alone, a single person, or largely on your own, you better be careful and you'd better get home [before dark], otherwise [the public] may find you dead along a path or in the street. …The *interahamwe* [Hutu militiamen] claim that none of them killed my mother, but I know they did.[4] So, what's the point [of testifying at gacaca]? Also, they're dangerous. They were vicious and remain vicious. So, unless I want death, I must remain quiet.

When interviewees were asked if they thought gacaca was likely to help bring about reconciliation, the responses were mixed. Many were dubious, and many replied disdainfully. In fact, quite a few responded with a question along the following line: "What would you do if you saw your mother raped and butchered in front of your eyes? Would you be willing to forgive?"

A young man who lost his entire family responded in a whisper:

> Reconciliation? There are many things I [would] look at before I'd consider reconciliation taking place. I may try to reconciliate [*sic*] with one person but … (At this point, he looked extremely sad and depressed and seemed at a loss for words.) [Expletive]…. I think reconciliation is only possible for a person who wasn't hunted, who didn't lose all his family, and didn't experience all these horrors, because that picture is hard to erase from your brain.

The woman in her mid-30s mentioned earlier, who lost her entire family, had an extremely bitter view of gacaca:

> As for gacaca, I never expected anything from it. We live close to the [main prison near the town of Butare] and prisoners come out to do community work and they go to their families as much as they want. To me they are not prisoners. And I see them as representatives of the killers of my family, and they are free but my family does not come back.

A man in his 50s, whose wife and five children were slain at Murambi (a district in southern Rwanda), had the following to say:

> At gacaca, whenever I provided information about what I had witnessed, the [Hutus]—especially the relatives of the murderers—shouted, "He's lying! He's lying! He doesn't know!" Because no one was [stepping forward to corroborate my testimony] even the judge considered me a liar. I had to testify about what I saw, but the other survivors did not see what I saw because there were so many of us and we were all in different places [of the compound where tens of thousands had been gathered]. So, of course, we did not see the same thing. But still, [the alleged perpetrators and their families] all yelled at me, "You're a liar! You were hiding! How could you see me?"

Resurgence of the genocide ideology. As previously mentioned, a major issue that has gained broad attention from the Rwandan government and the media of late is the reappearance of "genocide ideology" in Rwanda. Commenting on such, a widow in Huye said:

> I see genocide tendencies in the comments made by local people about the national government. Every time there is a policy to implement, Hutus in the neighborhood will make comparisons with the [Hutu-dominated government in 1994 that supported Hutu extremists], mostly saying that things were perfect with the former government, the Habyrimana regime. That is what scares me most.

Survivors' sense of safety or lack thereof in Rwanda today. Many of the interviewees asserted that they do not feel safe living in Rwanda amongst the families of former Hutu extremists or amongst extremists freed from prison who killed the survivor's family members.[5] One woman, in her mid-30s, whose mother, father, brothers and sisters were killed, said plaintively:

> I don't feel safe living here. As I said, my children don't go far from [our house]. I don't like Rwanda. I would go somewhere else. If I had the [financial] means, I would be gone already. Look at me, one single individual on this ground, alone, and [the Hutus] unite [and continue to live in the village and harass our family on a daily basis].

The memories of the horror. For many, if not most, survivors, the memories of the horror never seem to fade; indeed, they are something the survivors are forced to live with day-in and day-out. The man from Murambi said:

> As for my wife and five children, I do not know exactly how they died. The women and children were inside the classrooms (half-built classrooms located on a compound in Murambi where ten thousand or more people were encouraged to seek shelter and then were slaughtered in a massacre that lasted half a night and almost all the next day). What I do know is that they must have been killed in a very horrible way because the interahamwe went in the classroom and slashed them with machetes, cutting off limbs and killing them with *masues* (clubs that had nails sticking out from the heads of the clubs). What is unbearable is the memory of hearing my children (He said "my children," but must have meant all of the children huddled therein) and their begging for forgiveness even though they had nothing to ask forgiveness for.

Another man, now an undergraduate at the National University of Rwanda, says he will never forget that throughout the orgy of killing at the Nyamata Catholic Church, the victims sang "Onward Christian Soldiers." Even down to the last few people, those who had not been killed yet kept singing.

Teaching about Genocide: The Antecedents and the Aftermath

Due to an over-packed curriculum and the time constraints faced by teachers—as well as a lack of understanding of the challenges faced by genocide survivors—it is probably safe to assume that the life of survivors in the post genocide period is hardly touched upon by most teachers who introduce the topic of genocide. That said, for students to truly understand the profound ramifications of genocide, they must understand the antecedents (which inform us about why and how genocide ultimately took place), the actual genocide, and the life of survivors in the aftermath. The latter is true for two main reasons: First, the survivors of genocide often continue to suffer long after the killing has stopped, which has serious consequences for a country trying to get back on its feet (e.g., individuals who cannot contribute to the remaking of the society, people who require ever-increasing and expensive help as a result of ongoing trauma, and a sense of hopelessness that could and does seep into the body politic); second, if a nation recovering from genocide is not careful about how it goes about rebuilding its society (e.g., making sure impunity is not allowed, addressing remnants of any genocide ideology, providing for the survivors' safety, transitioning from what was likely an authoritarian society to a democratic society), it can become a seedbed for the germination of future atrocities, be they crimes against humanity or genocide. What has been presented herein only begins to touch on the many—not to mention critical—issues that plague post-genocide societies and the survivors of genocide. If the world is concerned about genocide victims, then there needs to be more awareness about what the survivors continue to face years after the killings and to figure out ways to contribute to their welfare.

Conclusion

While many philanthropists and individual governments have stepped up over the years to assist nations in the throes of a post-genocide period (then-President George W. Bush, former President Bill Clinton, former Prime Minster Tony Blair, and computer magnate and philanthropist Bill Gates have all visited Rwanda in recent years and promised to provide funding for various projects), much of the help does not seem to reach those most in need. Granted, as a post-genocide society becomes stronger—as it develops more small industry and jobs, improves its schools, provides support for innovative business ventures—then, sooner or later, in one way or another, the lives of many in the nation are bound to improve. Nevertheless, tens of thousands of survivors in Rwanda have waited 15 years to see their lives improve. That is a long time to wait when a person has few or no family members to help him or her purchase a home, obtain a university education, provide comfort when he or she is faced with abject depression, or provide security in the face of threats by the very killers who murdered his or her family members.

Notes

1. I conducted the interviews along with two colleagues—Rafiki Ubaldo and Ernest Mutwarasibo—both of whom are survivors of the 1994 genocide and both of whom served, at different points in time, as my interpreters. The vast majority of the interviews were in Kinyarwanda. All those conducted in English, I did alone.
2. The information in parentheses following a specific focus refers to the local/national organization funding the effort.
3. Many survivors have shared with me that they no longer value or cherish their physical lives. That is, I have heard, time and again, variations of the following comments: "I am already dead! I feel dead! I have nothing to live for!" and "I wish I were dead" and "I'm just waiting to die so I can join my loved ones who died in the genocide."
4. *Interahamwe* comprised the Hutu militias who largely carried out the 1994 Rwandan genocide. In Kinyarwanda "interahamwe" means "those who stand together" or "those who work together" or "those who fight together." They are now comprised of remnants of the Hutu militias and former Rwandan armed forces (FAR - Forces armees rwandaises), and are largely based in the Democratic Republic of Congo, but occasionally make incursions into Rwanda and are responsible for continuing to spread the same ideology that laid the groundwork for the 1994 genocide.
5. Many survivors said they felt comfortable around former genocidaires or their families if they (the survivors) lived in a village or town other than where they resided during the genocide. They said, however, they would not feel safe if they had to live in the same village with those who killed or the families of those who killed their love ones.

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