

# Rwanda's Mediation of Memorialization through Community-Based Sociotherapy

Written by Annemiek Richters, Grace Kagoyire, Theophile Sewimfura  
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This year's commemoration period in Rwanda marked the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Rwandan genocide against the Tutsi. Its motto was threefold: remember – unite – renew. The intention of Rwanda's annual memorialization – which, with reference to the 100-day mass genocide in 1994, runs for 100 days – is to acknowledge the country's violent history, to heal the wounds caused by the grievous past, to reduce societal tensions among opposing groups and individuals, and in so doing, to prevent the recurrence of collective violence in the future.

During the genocide, about one million Rwandans were murdered and hundreds of thousands were wounded, abused, raped, and tortured. Most of those who survived lost family and friends, while many were orphaned. Tens of thousands participated in the killing and pillaging throughout the country. Most of the victims were Tutsi, though many Hutus were also persecuted and killed. The perpetrators were mainly Hutu, but nevertheless, hundreds of thousands of Hutus did not kill anyone. There were Hutus who also risked their own lives to save Tutsis, while occasionally Tutsis, either willingly or by force, joined the gangs of killers and looters (Fujii 2009). The identities of 'victim' and 'perpetrator' can therefore not be reserved exclusively for specific groups.

The genocide started on the 7<sup>th</sup> of April 1994 and ended on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July 1994. On July 4<sup>th</sup> this year, Rwanda celebrates twenty years of liberation from the destructive mass violence, as well as the country's achievements in terms of sustaining peace and socio-economic development. The impending celebrations this year raised the question among us about the extent to which Rwandans have in reality been liberated from genocide-related memories that have the potential to be self-destructive and/or destructive and harmful towards others. Below, we explore some answers to this question with reference to the impact of the psychosocial intervention of community-based sociotherapy; in particular, regarding how participants deal with painful memories.

All four of us are involved in the implementation of sociotherapy in Rwandan communities at the grassroots level. We were particularly interested to know about the impact that sociotherapy has had on its graduates in terms of the healing and reconciliation objectives of the commemoration. For that purpose, we held informal conversations with a small number of sociotherapy graduates during the first week of this year's commemoration, the so-called 'mourning week'. Since their responses to our questions can only be understood with some knowledge of the sociotherapy approach and the activities that take place during the mourning week, let us first turn to these two topics.

### **Community-based sociotherapy in Rwanda**

Community-based sociotherapy was introduced in the north of Rwanda in 2005 and subsequently in the east in 2008. More recently, the intervention has begun to be rolled out nationwide (see [www.sociotherapy.org](http://www.sociotherapy.org)). Sociotherapy in Rwanda aims to assist people in dealing with the negative impacts of the war and genocide, as well as its aftermath, on their daily lives and psychosocial wellbeing, and to contribute to sustainable processes of reconciliation within communities. It focuses in particular on the reconstruction of dignity, respect, trust, and safety among Rwandans.

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Sociotherapy is conducted in small groups of on average ten to fifteen people, and uses the group dynamic as a therapeutic medium in the establishment of trust, the creation of an open environment for discussion, and the formation of peer support structures. The groups meet weekly for approximately three hours over a period of fifteen weeks, in a place located in the group members' living environment that they experience as safe. The location can be a school, a church, an office, a private sitting room, a place under a tree, or on the grass in the open air. Two trained facilitators guide the group through the sociotherapy phases of safety, trust, care, respect, new rules, and memories. Throughout the journey, the following seven principles are applied: interest, equality, democracy, participation, responsibility, learning-by-doing, and the here-and-now.

It is the dynamic complexity of principles and phases as a whole that makes sociotherapy work in the way it does. As described elsewhere (Richters et al. 2010), the phase of 'care' proves to be the phase in which the healing of people's social and individual distress starts to take effect. When a person understands that he or she is safe and can trust his/her fellow men and women in the group, this person usually start to connect with others and to tell the group members his/her problems. Group participants are encouraged to take care of each other and to try – in consultation with one another – to solve their current problems, which enables them to once again think about the future in a constructive way.

In contrast to many other healing and reconciliation programs in Rwanda, confrontation with painful memories of the past is not encouraged at the start of the intervention. The focus is first on actual daily life problems, including, for instance, poverty issues, family conflicts, gender-based violence, health problems, drug abuse, and distrust of neighbours. It is usually only towards the end of the 15 weeks of group sessions, when an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect has been established, that painful memories of the past are shared – though, of course, in some groups these memories are openly shared from the start. Throughout the sessions, participants start to listen to each other's stories of pain, understand each other's suffering, and care for one another. Conflicts are frequently solved, interpersonal reconciliation takes place, and various forms of social justice are achieved.

Some other distinctive characteristics of sociotherapy include the fact that participants work in small groups while sitting in a circle (including the facilitators); that these groups are formed of people who live in the same neighbourhood, who continue to meet after each group session and also after the completion of all group sessions; that people are included regardless of their education, gender, age, religion, historical identity, etc.; that the meetings take place in people's living environment and not in training centres; that facilitation is conducted by men and women who usually live in the same neighbourhood as the group participants; that during the group sessions, Kinyarwanda is the primary language spoken throughout (thus there is no disruption by having to translate the teachings of non-native speakers); and that no meals or money are provided, which implies that the people who participate develop a sincere wish to heal their state of mind as well as one another, without the motivation of receiving material support.

## **The official mourning week in Rwanda**

The post-genocide Rwandan government developed a policy of 'national unity and reconciliation' in order to overcome the traumas and long-lasting effects of the war and genocide on the population. Genocide memorials and commemorations are the most visible forms of the implementation of this policy (Brandstetter 2010). During the national mourning week, ceremonies are held in stadiums, district and sector offices, and memorials and gravesites across the country. The genocide is remembered in speeches, testimonies, and prayers, in the solemn reburial of human remains, candlelit vigils, passing nights around the fire, visiting and offering support to survivors, and in television and radio programs that follow the memorial events and broadcast mourning songs and poems throughout the week. The messages of 'remember' and 'never forget', and the credo 'never again', are omnipresent.

Across Rwanda, citizens are expected to converge at venues in their respective villages to pay homage to genocide victims, attend conferences and meetings, and console and comfort genocide survivors and orphans. The topics of this year's daily afternoon lectures that we observed at the village level were: the importance of commemoration; the history of the genocide; the identification of trauma symptoms and how to support traumatized people; the fight against genocide and genocidal ideology; genocide's consequences for the younger generation and the expected contribution of youth to fight against future genocide; the prevention of and fight against negligence regarding the

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genocide; care for safety inside and outside the country; strategies to safeguard justice; how to take care of one's mental health; how to contribute to economic growth; and finally, good governance. The conference on the seventh day summed up all that had been presented and discussed during the previous week, and culminated in a closing ceremony.

## **Approach to data collection**

The general themes that guided our data collection were: the meaning of the commemoration of the genocide against the Tutsi among Rwandans with different historical backgrounds; the (possibly) diverse ways in which they experience the commemoration; and the possible difference that community-based sociotherapy has made for participants in terms of attitudes, feelings, emotions, and behaviour during the commemoration period, in particular the mourning week. Sub-questions were: Does the continuous memorialization of the past re-traumatize those who suffered severely from it, or does it instead, as promoted, contribute to healing their wounds? Does memorialization indeed contribute to the healing of social divisions; in particular, divisions between genocide survivors and former genocide perpetrators? How do the children of both genocide survivors and former genocide perpetrators perceive the mourning week and participate in it? What meaning does the mourning period have for those who lived in exile during the genocide and returned to Rwanda in its aftermath? Does the healing and reconciliation process that sociotherapy graduates embark on in the sociotherapy groups prove during the commemoration period to be sustainable, or does this period breach that process?

We spoke with a small number of sociotherapy graduates (13 in total) in the north and east of Rwanda over the course of the mourning week regarding the issues listed above. We selected our sample of respondents purposefully, thereby including 3 genocide survivors (2 males and 1 female), 2 ex-prisoners convicted of genocide crimes (1 male and 1 female), 1 spouse of an ex-prisoner (female), 3 children of an ex-prisoner (2 males and 1 female), 1 child of a genocide survivor (female), and 3 so-called returnees (males). In addition, we held two short focus group discussions with the majority of the 19 female genocide survivors who have told their life histories to two of us over the past years (cf. Richters and Kagoyire 2014) about their engagement with the mourning week.

Below, we present the main outcomes of our conversations. We in no way claim that these outcomes are representative of all different perceptions, attitudes, feelings, emotions, and behaviours among the Rwandan population as related to the commemoration. What we present is merely a snapshot of some responses to the commemoration. The names used for our respondents are pseudonyms and, for the sake of anonymization, we have slightly changed some identifying details of the stories where necessary.

## **Meaning attribution and living through the mourning week**

All respondents attributed great value to the mourning week. They emphasized that remembering is important in order not to forget. Some, however, noted that there are also Rwandans who shy away from remembering. Georges, an ex-prisoner, recalled how he and his mates in prison, who like him were convicted of genocide crimes, did not like to hear songs or watch TV news about the genocide during the commemoration period, because it would worsen their feelings of guilt and shame.

Batistuta is one of our genocide survivor respondents for whom mourning is extremely important – as, according to him, it has always been in Rwandan culture. Traditionally, mourning for someone who has passed away would last seven days. Friends, neighbours, and members of the community would stay with the family of the deceased during these days, weeping with them and comforting them. According to Batistuta: "Today it is different. We gather at the same place (for instance, at the office of the cell, the lowest administrative unit in Rwanda) and go back to our homes (after the afternoon conference); we do not share drinks". He added that genocide survivors are more or less on their own with their grief during the mourning week, even though they are physically together during meetings and ceremonies:

Throughout the year, genocide survivors remember. You cannot forget! However, the ceremonies and speeches during the mourning week re-open the wounds more than in other periods of the year. Being overwhelmed by grief

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does not leave much space to us genocide survivors to comfort each other. Those who could support us are mostly those who caused the problem (those who were involved in the killing). However, these people are ashamed or angry. Nevertheless, thanks to the government, who is playing a big role in this matter, the mourning period is a mirror for everybody, enabling each one to deal with the past full of wounds and prepare a future for our children.

We found great variety in the ways in which our genocide survivor respondents lived through the mourning week. Not everyone felt able to participate in the commemoration activities. Some preferred to stay at home, at least throughout most of the week. A few wept a lot, finding their sheets wet in the morning, and suffered from constant headaches. Some slept a lot, while others could hardly sleep at all. Some considered the days spent at home to be a good rest and found remembering at home to be the best way to pay tribute to the loved ones they had lost; if they did go out, it was mainly for a burial ceremony of family members. One woman felt very afraid during the mourning week because of gossiping in the neighbourhood that Tutsis would be killed again. She did not consider this unlikely since unidentified people had thrown stones onto the roof of her house, and (presumably) the same people had wounded the cow of a neighbour with a knife.

Some genocide survivor respondents participated in *all* of the memorial activities in their neighbourhood, while others attended at most only one activity. Most of the latter felt unable to join others in visiting places where they had hidden during the genocide, fearing that they would experience re-traumatization. An exception is Chamima, who marched to all of the places that reminded her of her genocide experiences: "During the genocide they killed me so many times. I could hardly move. Now I can move freely and I decided to visit all places important to me". Constance also felt strong this year. In previous years, she used to throw stones at people, and was fearful of being killed by Hutus. This year, however, she felt completely safe wherever she went, including at the night vigils.

The ex-prisoners in our sample value the week because of the comfort it offers to genocide survivors, even though they recognize that it may also seriously (re-)traumatize them and increase their desperation. As far as they themselves are concerned, the speeches and meetings make them realize again how severe their crimes were. They consider the week to be a special occasion on which to regret their deeds, to ask for forgiveness from God and those whom they have wronged, and in some cases to care for genocide survivors. Frida, a female ex-prisoner, used the opportunity of neighbourhood meetings to sit with survivors, whom most of the time she fears. By doing so, she can show that she is a changed person. When she sees someone crying, she can take care of that person. The commemoration period gives her the strength to show survivors that the forgiveness she is seeking comes from the bottom of her heart.

For the returnees, the mourning week is a period for Rwandans to share lessons from history and to come to a common understanding of this history, as well as to develop strategies for a bright future for the country. For one returnee, commemoration is a source of energy. It pushes him to work harder than before and to decide how to shape his new life in Rwanda. For another, the period gives value to those who lost all sense of their value during the genocide. And for yet another returnee, the period helps him to understand better the reasons why he lost his family members, as well as the fact that he is not alone in having suffered this kind of loss.

## **The contribution of the mourning week to reconciliation**

For Batutista, a genocide survivor, commemoration contributes to the reconciliation process by providing an opportunity to understand what happened:

In previous years, many Hutus in this community were not free and willing to attend the mourning meetings, because the fear and shame of what was done in the name of Hutus was too much for them. Those who did attend had to show patience when genocide survivors, mostly outside official meetings, spoke of all Hutus as Interahamwe (the militia who perpetrated the genocide killing). However, as years passed by, a genocide survivor could testify to how he was protected by a Hutu during the genocide, which led to a decrease in the blaming of all Hutus. Realizing that some Hutu even died because of providing that protection contributed to the reconciliation process.

Chamima, also a genocide survivor, remained angry at the killers, however, since she felt that they did not sincerely

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regret their crimes:

Not all those people who contributed to the genocide have yet sought forgiveness. It is not us survivors who will have to look for them and forgive them. It is not me who has to apologize and forgive at the same time in order to reconcile with offenders. In this period, they get angry instead of regretting what they have done. The government asks those killers to testify the sins committed during the genocide. However, when they are repeating that evilness of theirs, it seems that it does not mean anything serious to them. I cannot read any sign of regret on their faces. They repeat what they did like a poem they memorized. So the commemoration is not contributing to reconciliation... It is very difficult to reconcile with a person who does not want to say the truth in order to show that he/she recognizes the heaviness of the sin committed. Those who looted properties do not want to pay us back. However, this cannot hinder me talking to them with limitation.

Chamima's negative views on reconciliation may have been influenced by her recent experience during the mourning week near the swamp where she had been hiding in 1994. She met a lady there who had a child with her, who, with his noisy shoes, was trampling on the tombs of Chamima's relatives. A young boy who was there, also a survivor, came to Chamima to ask her whether or not he should urge the child to step down. Before Chamima could respond, they heard the mother of the child saying that the bones buried in the tombs were of animals and not human beings. Chamima replied to the woman that she was right: "When the killers explained why they were killing us, we did not feel like human beings anymore".

Maria's husband is in prison, and for this she feels guilty. The commemoration speeches make her and, according to her, other women in a similar position, understand the heaviness of Rwanda's history:

Thus, we feel the grief survivors endure. And like it was said in the conference of today, when they taught us to take care of traumatized people, when such a person cries, you take care of that person instead of remaining far away from him or her. Before, it was not like this. As a non-survivor, before, I would remain where I was, instead of approaching that colleague in tears.

For Georges (an ex-prisoner), the commemoration period is a key that opens the door to help him apologize to survivors and comfort them:

In this period, first of all survivors suffer, remembering the loss of their relatives, but also we (genocide perpetrators) are suffering. We suffer from the loss of our human dignity. We all need to heal and reconcile. For us to heal and reconcile, we have to go back to our history and remember what happened. Therefore, what the government is doing (organizing the commemoration and urging people to participate) is like a medical doctor treating the wound of a child. However painful it is, he has to clean it so that the child heals. Before, many people did not like this period, but later it was clear that it was helping all of us, not only survivors. We first thought that the mourning period was only for them. Now I think differently. This period helps all of us to face history and start reducing the fear and anger we have towards one another. We feel shame and guilt, but also sometimes anger towards those who imprisoned us and fear that the genocide survivors will not accept and forgive us. Without true repentance and forgiveness, we cannot expect reconciliation. To reconcile is not easy for all of us, but I have experienced that it is possible.

Frida was forced to join the Interahamwe and to engage in the looting of property, replacing her Hutu husband who had become incapacitated and could not do 'the work'. She was imprisoned for her participation and feels very guilty. However, she did not kill. Frida personally experienced signs of reconciliation during the mourning period: "When a survivor receives me well in his or her house, I feel released. From that I start to feel trust that they forgave me, and this gives me the hope of reconciling with them".

One of the returnees observed that in the testimonies presented during the commemoration gatherings, some former perpetrators do confess and feel motivated to approach survivors to apologize to them and thus hopefully regain inner peace. Daniel, whose father is an ex-prisoner, was, however, very cynical about reconciliation. This year, he did choose to leave his home during the commemoration, though in previous years he did not leave his house because some years back he had experienced that whenever he passed people who knew that at that time his father was in

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prison, they would call him Interahamwe: "Even if my father was a genocidaire, I'm not! Why to be considered like my father, while in 1994 I was 6 years old?"

## **The contribution of sociotherapy to healing and reconciliation during the mourning week**

Most of our respondents expressed the fact that sociotherapy had made a difference in terms of their experience of the mourning period, when compared to how they had felt before. Furthermore, experiencing some healing of their own wounds has given them the strength and will to assist others. Batistuta stated that, before he attended sociotherapy, like other survivors he had been very self-destructive and aggressive or hurtful towards others during the mourning week. Once, together with other survivors, out of anger he had jumped on an ex-prisoner at a genocide memorial church with the intention of killing him, though soldiers had prevented him from doing so. Now, due to sociotherapy, he has reconciled with that ex-prisoner. Batistuta's participation in a sociotherapy group composed of male genocide survivors and male ex-prisoners contributed to his change in attitude:

In sociotherapy, we commemorate without saying that we are going to do it. It's automatic. From the start of the sessions, what we do is commemorate. You remember and together with others you build yourself. We do not wait for the one week in April to do so. Because of sociotherapy, we all entered that week as strong persons. When our group started, not only us survivors were traumatized, also former perpetrators were, which contributed to mistrust and a lack of understanding between us. Sociotherapy has helped us to listen to each other and understand one another, which contributed to reconciliation among us.

Georges had previously suffered from nightmares about the killings he had participated in, as well as about being killed by survivors. Due to this, after he was released from prison he was not interested in attending commemoration events since he did not feel safe going there. However, out of fear of being accused of still holding genocide ideologies, he did eventually go: "Physically I was there, but in my mind I was elsewhere. Attendance became especially difficult for Georges when survivors gave testimonies and he realized that what they were sharing was me. Sometimes you knew better than them what they were saying. At that moment you did not know where to hide your face!" In his sociotherapy group, however, when sitting with those who had previously attacked him for his past actions, he began to understand why many survivors had acted in such a way. Gradually, a feeling of safety emerged within the group, even though he was in the company of genocide survivors. That had a positive spin-off effect in terms of his participation in the mourning week events.

Bernard, a male genocide survivor, has learned through sociotherapy to share experiences and emotions with others and to take care of others: "Instead of judging other people, I can now take care of them, because everyone (genocide perpetrators or survivors) is still facing the genocide consequences. It affects our whole generation".

One of our returnee respondents who lost many family members during the genocide told that:

Before sociotherapy, I used to remember hopelessly, with much grief, anger and hatred towards all Hutus. But now, due to self-acceptance, remembering is no longer a period of hating others. My remembrance values others and I try to listen to them and cope with my sorrow.

A substantial number of the respondents stated that, through sociotherapy, they had learned not only to focus on their own misery, but to comfort each other and care for others. They now felt able to reach out to others and care for those in need during the mourning week, instead of isolating themselves or, as some genocide survivors used to do, throwing stones at others. One of the genocide survivors stated: "When you are healed, you feel able to help others. The counsel we received from sociotherapy helped us to help other people such as our children at home". What is very illuminating in terms of healing is that many of the female genocide survivors who had experienced rape during the genocide used to suffer severely in previous years from panic attacks during the mourning week. For all of the women with whom we spoke, this is no longer the case. Instead, some now assist others who continue to suffer from such panic attacks.

## **The value that the post-genocide generation attributes to commemoration**

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Some of our respondents felt worried that as the number of people who lived through the genocide decreases, the value that the next generation will give to commemoration will also diminish. One ex-prisoner felt that the younger generation is ignorant of the country's past: "They do not know what happened and they do not care. They do not take the history seriously". One female genocide survivor held the same view: "The youth of today is sleeping. They do not understand the genocide history. They are somehow absentminded". While some respondents were not worried, since they were certain that the government will surely prevent another genocide, others stressed the importance that youth remember the past in order to prevent them from repeating the same atrocities again: "The genocide was committed by youth like them. So they have to participate in the memorial activities and learn from them how bad killing others is". Many respondents agreed that youth need to be taught about the history of Rwanda, because that will prevent genocide ideology and will contribute to the development of the country. Some respondents observed that within families that do teach their children about history, this is not always done from the perspective of reconciliation, but rather in a way that reproduces social division.

A few genocide survivors pointed out that while the trauma of the genocide is gradually decreasing in most adults, it is actually increasing in some children, and this will affect their participation in the mourning period. One survivor stated that while she herself no longer has panic attacks during the mourning period, it is now her younger cousin who suffers from them. Other respondents – genocide survivors as well as perpetrators – also observed that the next generations will still inherit the history of the problems that they experienced first-hand. Some young people have indeed been poisoned by their parents, as they point their fingers of blame towards their (previous) adversaries.

A few parents actually seemed to experience more problems, in terms of reconciliation between themselves and their children, than their children experienced with those belonging to another ethnic group. For instance, it is a problem that many former genocidaires do not tell their children how and why they were involved in the killings, and genocide survivors do not tell their children the full truth about what they experienced. Many of these children may start to hate their parents or distance themselves from them. This was the case with the children of Frida, who started to hate her when they learned that she had been in jail because of her participation in the genocide (albeit not as a killer). Jeanine is angry at her mother because she had always hidden from Jeanine that she was born out of the rape her mother had experienced during the genocide.

## Conclusion

The stories of most of the respondents with whom we spoke illustrate that sociotherapy is an approach that can prepare and help people to live through the mourning week in a way that invigorates them, instead of re-traumatizing and socially isolating them. Their newly developed strategies to cope with the painful past help them to live through the commemoration period in a way that most experience, at least to some extent, as healing and reconciliatory. Memories of what they went through, as victims or perpetrators, no longer generate feelings and actions that are self-destructive – such as suicide attempts – or actions that are harmful towards others – such as physical attacks.

The genocide survivors among our respondents have found the strength to go beyond solely focusing on their own pain while quietly staying home; now they also reach out to others and care for them. Former genocide perpetrators, on the other hand, have learned to cope with their feelings of shame and guilt and have also started to reach out to those whom they harmed in order to care for them, and as such start a process of reconciliation. There is evidence that in neighbourhoods where sociotherapy has been practiced for some time, the participation of the population in memorial activities and the support for genocide survivors in need, whether financial or otherwise, has substantially increased. In particular, it is the empathy and care for one another, as developed in sociotherapy, that has contributed to this change.

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