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Research Visit to Rwanda
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Introduction

Three years ago, I was invited to Rwanda to observe the 17th Commemoration of Genocide, which is an annual event that takes place over a week in all Rwandan cities and villages. During my visit, which was co-hosted by the Director of the Centre for Conflict Management, Professor Paul Rutayisire, I had the opportunity to visit several sites of commemoration and commemorative events throughout the country. The experience was most enlightening, and demonstrated most poignantly the unique approach adopted in Rwanda for dealing with the collective trauma of the genocide in a way that encourages reconciliation among survivors and non-survivors and their families. The experience led to my hosting a symposium entitled “New Knowledge Systems in Post-Genocide and Post-Conflict Studies: An Afropolitan Dialogue” at the University of Cape Town (UCT), where I held a professorship in the psychology department. The outcome of the symposium was working with some of the participants on a special issue focusing on women in post-conflict regions in Africa. The special issue will be published in the internationally accredited peer reviewed journal, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* in the fall 2014 publication of the journal.

Insights gained from subsequent visits to Rwanda led to consideration of Rwanda as an important exemplar for learning about what it means for survivors and victims’ families to live together in the same country, and, as in the case of Rwanda, sometimes as neighbours. Recently we launched a research project that brought together an international and disciplinary diverse group of scholars and practitioners whose research is concerned with issues of historical trauma, reconciliation and social transformation in the aftermath of mass violence and genocide in countries where victims/survivors, perpetrators and bystanders continue to live together in the same country. These scholars and practitioners met at UFS over a two-day symposium to learn from each other about the range of experiences of victims living together with perpetrators and bystanders/"beneficiaries" in different post-conflict societies. Entitled “Living Together in the Aftermath of Mass Trauma and Violence: An International Research Forum,” the goal of the symposium was to engage in a deeper reflection on the question of what it means for victims to live together with perpetrators in the aftermath of historical trauma. We were also interested in understanding what some of the common problems are, and/or what are the problems unique to each region that emerge after mass violence.

I have selected Rwanda as a kind of “research site” and special case study to explore these questions, and I have put together a group of scholars and practitioners from South Africa and the United States to travel together on this research trip. A report, which will be either written in the form of articles by the different participants, or written collectively, will be the first output from the research visit. More writings that are scholarly will form part of the outputs planned at the end of 2015 as part of the International Research Forum described above.

Broader Aims of the Project

Is the language forgiveness appropriate in the aftermath of mass atrocity? Are truth commissions the kinds of post-conflict institutional processes that are conducive to forgiveness by victims of gross human rights violations? When loved ones have been tortured, maimed, “disappeared” and killed, what does forgiveness and reconciliation mean for victims and survivors of gross human rights violations? What are the conditions necessary for forgiveness to occur in these situations, and what

are the conditions necessary for healing of individuals and communities in the aftermath of mass violence?

These are not just rhetorical questions. The significance of these questions lies in the fact that answers to the questions are far from obvious, and this presents special challenges for any project that seeks to explore the conditions by which forgiveness and reconciliation in the context of extreme violence and destruction of human life are achieved and rendered compelling. The concepts of forgiveness and reconciliation are essentially contested concepts. However, it is well established that the prominence of these concepts in academic debate in recent years emerged following the work of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, as well as the implementation of the traditional approach to dealing with perpetrators of crime in Rwanda, the *gacaca* process. *Gacaca* in the Kinyarwanda language means “justice on the grass” and refers to processes of justice as practiced by traditional communities. This practice was officially adopted in Rwanda as a strategy of dealing with perpetrators of genocide through trial within the communities where the crimes were committed.

In all the cases of post-conflict reconstruction where some form of restorative justice mechanisms have been implemented, Rwanda and South Africa stand out as the countries where stories of forgiveness and meaningful reconciliation have occurred. The question might be asked, is there something unique about African culture that makes forgiveness after mass atrocity first conceivable, and ultimately achievable? This project seeks to investigate this question.

Our project is inspired primarily by the following factors. Firstly, South Africa and Rwanda have been in the centre of current debates about forgiveness and reconciliation in post-conflict societies. Secondly, there is a qualitative difference between situations where victims and perpetrators do not have to live together in one country (such as in the aftermath of the Holocaust), and situations where victims and perpetrators have to live in one country, and even closely together as neighbours. Post-apartheid South Africa and post-genocide Rwanda are good examples of the latter case. But Rwanda stands alone as a country that has drawn from its cultural values and practices to implement strategies of bringing peace to communities even as victims live as neighbours with perpetrators. Some of the initiatives that have encouraged forgiveness and reconciliation in Rwandan communities set important precedent for a unique response to genocide and crimes against humanity. This is the reason Rwanda was chosen for this research visit a sight for a profound learning experience about the issues we are concerned about in Trauma, Forgiveness and Reconciliation Studies.

Our aim is not to try to equate the experiences of victim and perpetrator groups in South Africa and Rwanda. We want to explore how insights from the South Africa and Rwanda can be developed conceptually with the objective of applying these theoretical insights to the understanding of the complex and subtle processes that unfold across generations when victims and perpetrators have to live together in the same country.

The main questions we are interested in addressing are the following:

1. What new avenues of inquiry do the stories of forgiveness and reconciliation that have emerged in the Rwanda and South Africa open up for the global academic community?
2. What are the critical moments in encounters between victims and perpetrators that open up the possibility of empathy or forgiveness for the perpetrator, and what is the role of cultural dialogic practices, if any, in fostering respect for the Other?
3. What are the risks involved in bringing victims and perpetrators into community with each other after mass atrocity?
4. What is missing in the discourse on forgiveness, apology and reconciliation after mass atrocity, and what can we learn from the Rwandan example?