

Genocide Commemoration and Reconciliation in Rwanda from a Liturgical Ritual Perspective

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Introduction

In 1994, Rwanda, in Central Eastern Africa, has experienced a crime of genocide that was perpetrated against the Tutsi people. This crime occurred after the propagation of a long-lasting ideology of division and discrimination that was introduced by the colonial powers and pursued by the first and second Republics of Rwanda. During that genocide, which killed more than one million Tutsi, other people (Hutu, Twa and foreigners) who were not supporting its plan and execution, were also murdered or threatened in different ways (imprisonment, physical assaults, psychological harassment, and confiscation or destruction of properties). Apart from the loss of human lives and deterioration of relationships, the genocide has declined the Rwanda's economy and psychologically affected genocide survivors and perpetrators alike.

After realizing that most of the studies on the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi were carried out from political, historical, and sociological perspectives, I decided to approach the topic from a liturgical ritual perspective. It is from that angle that my dissertation entitled: “Genocide Commemoration and Reconciliation in Rwanda from a Liturgical Ritual Perspective”, was situated in the area of Practical Theology, in the sub-area of Liturgical Studies. It was guided by the following general research question: How is the genocide commemoration performed at Kirinda Parish of the Presbyterian Church in Rwanda (EPR Kirinda) shaped and appropriated by participants? And how does it contribute to reconciliation? To be more specific, this general research question was subdivided in three sub-questions: (1) How is the genocide commemoration performed at EPR Kirinda structured?; (2) What are the constituting elements of that ritual and how are they appropriated by participants?; (3) How can the genocide commemoration be analyzed with regard to reconciliation? My research was fully published in the Netherlands Studies in Ritual and Liturgy Series 27, and is made up of seven chapters which are succinctly presented in the next paragraphs.

1 Background and setup

Chapter 1 situates the study in its broad context by not only portraying the causes of genocide, but

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also by indicating how the post-genocide Rwanda has addressed the consequences of that tragedy. This background chapter demonstrates that no single theory can fully portray the drivers that led to the genocide that was perpetrated against the Tutsi in Rwanda. Rather, political, cultural, religious, and socioeconomic factors are combined to shape the processes that culminated in genocide.

Whereas the theory of contingency limits its explanation to proximate causes (the context of the 1990s war that nurtured conditions for genocide) and triggers (the crash of the presidential aircraft on 6 April 1994) of genocide, primordialists and instrumentalists look at how ethnic identities have become a ground for Rwandan elites to manipulate the masses. For culturalists and constructivists, the success of political manipulation and dissemination of genocide ideology was not only intensified by the culture of strict respects toward authorities and elders, but also by deplorable social, economic, and political conditions which were the forces that have changed the role of ethnicity in Rwanda.

This chapter further shows that both Catholic and Protestant churches have played an ambivalent role in genocide. On the negative side, some members of the clergy and ordinary church members have used the Bible to justify genocide. One of the examples is an ideological interpretation of the first book of Samuel, chapter 15, to justify that God would have abandoned Tutsi in the hands of Hutu as Amalekites were abandoned in the hands of the Israelites. Others were directly implicated in murdering Tutsi, or looting and destroying their properties. A tangible symbol is that in a country of more than 90% Christians, the churches' premises have become the sites of killing instead of being a refuge for the Tutsi who were being hunted by the genocide perpetrators. Beyond direct and indirect involvement of churches in the crime of genocide, they are generally accused of silence and lack of courage to denounce and oppose the evil when it was necessary.

On the positive side, some churches and religious organizations have attempted to rally against the politics of division and discrimination. Examples include the committee of contact which mediated belligerent political parties in 1991, and a peace rally that was organized by the Kigali Parish of the Presbyterian Church in Rwanda based on the biblical book of Daniel, chapter 9. In addition, individual church members have saved the lives of Tutsi without considering the risk of being killed once caught. Examples include the one called Sokoza who was mentioned in a number of testimonials that were issued by the genocide survivors during the genocide commemorations performed at EPR Kirinda, and Christians of EPR Musenyi, who managed to save the lives of the entire family of their pastor by hiding all the family members. Thus, despite the negative criticisms that were raised against the Rwandan churches, these churches have never lost the power of positive influence on a population of more than 90% Christians either before, during or after genocide.

Against that background, this study is focused on genocide commemoration and reconciliation. It explores whether the genocide commemoration performed at EPR Kirinda has contributed to reconciliation or/and has exacerbated grievances.

2 Concepts and theories

Chapter 2 elucidates the key concepts and theories that have steered the research process. In short, this chapter portrays the church as a community of memory. By confronting the biblical paradigmatic memories of passion and liberation with the memories of suffering, those who are engaged in ritual find a meaning of life in the crisis which they are passing through. The concept of memory is here considered as the common denominator of everything related to remembrance. Whereas remembrance has an individual connotation of memory, the term commemoration captures its collective dimension. Most of the existing literature on memory specifies that memory is a selective recall of the past to meet the actual needs of people and create meaning for a certain commemorative community in a certain context. In that perspective, the commemoration of the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi is not a strict reporting of the past. It is rather concerned with the elements that fit the noble goals of the present, such as unity and reconciliation. Those elements do not only include a reference to the traditional factors of unity (common language, religion, and ancestors), but also to the promotion of a nationalist philosophy of “Ndi Umunyarwanda” (I am Rwandan) that claims a shared Rwandan citizenship over divisive ethnic identities of Hutu, Twa and Tutsi. Apart from the focus on the factors of unity, there is refutation or restriction of memories that do not contribute to meeting the needs of the present time, such as ethnic-based identity cards, colonial symbols, and symbols of the first and the second Republics. Those restrictions consist of changing the national anthem and flag, or replacing ancient teaching materials like books of history and changing administrative structures and names of places. Also, some individuals may change their names when they reflect the Rwandan divisive past. In short, the choice and arrangement of objects, the design of spaces and management of time, are all part of collective identity and characteristic of a given community in a given period.

In addition to memory, the concepts of ritual and liminality have also underpinned this study. Whereas ritual is defined as a collective, prescribed and repetitive symbolic performance, liminality refers to everything that is in transition, in the process of transformation from one state or from one situation to another. It is applied to this study in four main ways. First, liminality refers to the space of genocide commemoration (ritual space). It means that participants are separated from everyday life to meet at the commemoration site, which is a liminal encounter within which people are very flexible, obedient and receptive. They are not only transformed by what they hear from different speakers (official speeches, testimonials, songs, sermons, and prayers), but also by what they see (material symbols, gestures, others’ emotions) and what they experience (perform). Second, liminality means that the site of genocide commemoration is a place of encounters between visible and invisible worlds whereby the invisible is symbolically made visible. In this regard, this study explores how the commemoration of genocide allows the communication between participants and God, as well as between the living and the dead. Third, liminality is a transition between identities. In this way, the commemoration sites are liminal spaces that facilitate a transition from divisive ethnic identities of Hutu, Tutsi,

and Twa, toward a unifying national identity. Fourth, the concept of liminality is applied to this study in the sense of a continuous transition of Christians from earth to heaven.

Furthermore, this chapter highlights that the question of missing dead bodies is very critical to genocide commemoration and reconciliation. Consequently, the concept of absent ritual has informed this study. By availing pictures, lists, and other materials associated with the victims, the category of vicarious rituals arranges for alternatives to respond to the problem of impossible or banned rituals. The last section of chapter 2 is concerned with the concept of reconciliation, and incorporation of the notion of relational harmony into the framework of genocide commemoration and reconciliation. In this study, reconciliation is not understood as achievement, but as a continuous process of restoring and consolidating relationships. The African notion of relational harmony refers to the balance between various elements of the universe. By incorporating this notion in the frameworks of genocide commemoration and reconciliation, the horizon of this study is extended to embrace five interrelated categories of reconciliation: (1) reconciliation with oneself, (2) reconciliation with other human beings, (3) reconciliation with God, (4) reconciliation with the dead, and (5) reconciliation with the non-human nature.

3 Methodological consideration

Chapter 3 deals with methodological considerations. To conduct this study, I have adopted a qualitative empirical research approach to allow for a detailed description and analysis of the genocide commemoration performed at EPR Kirinda. Under this approach, a theological-ethnographic research design was used to explore the meanings that the ritual performers attribute to the constituents (places, time, participants, symbols, prayers and speeches) of genocide commemoration. Based on the living experience and perceptions of participants, I explored the meanings of genocide commemoration in two main phases. The first phase consisted of describing empirical data that I collected by the means of participant observation, interviews and desk research. The second phase was concerned with analysis and interpretation of research findings. To stay close to my empirical data, I used the techniques of coding and content analysis.

This analysis was first done from the perspective of ritual participants, and later from the perspective of existing literature by confronting empirical findings with existing theories of memory, ritual, and reconciliation. By combining inductive and deductive methods, I was, on the one hand, informed by the concept of appropriation to see how participants gave meaning to what they were experiencing. On the other hand, by bringing existing official discourse and academic theories into my reflections on the research findings, the concept of designation was also shading light on this study. Furthermore, by confronting top-down (designation) and bottom-up (appropriation) meanings, I attempted to look at the gap between both levels of meanings, and the question of power relations. As a result, the next three chapters respond to the questions of this study, based on empirical data.

4 Thick description of the genocide commemoration performed at EPR Kirinda

Chapter 4 deals with the first research question: How is the genocide commemoration performed at EPR Kirinda structured? This chapter indicates that the commemoration of genocide is consistently performed through six stages.

The initial stage, the preparation, aims at determining the date of the genocide commemoration, inviting guest speakers, designing the commemoration sites, and distributing roles among participants. The church bodies have changed the annual date of genocide commemoration in Kirinda from 14 April to different dates during the dry season of June to avoid the heavy rain of April. For some of the genocide survivors, the change of the time of genocide commemoration alters the meaning of commemoration because June does not help them to enact the painful experiences of April 1994.

The second stage, the commemoration night, is a night vigil around the mourning fire on the eve of the due date of public commemoration. Attendance is made up of almost 130 people, including genocide survivors, religious leaders, local government officials, students, and other people from the neighborhood of Kirinda Parish. Also, a limited number of guests from other districts and from abroad attend that event.

The third stage is the commemoration at the River of Nyabarongo. The commemorative rituals are performed by throwing flowers in that river and laying wreaths on the monument erected at its bank. For the genocide survivors, the River of Nyabarongo is a symbolic cemetery for their people who were thrown into it.

The fourth stage, the commemoration walk, is a quiet march from the area called Mburambazi to the memorial site of Kirinda, at the entrance of Kirinda Hospital (a Presbyterian health institution) where the fifth stage, the commemoration service, is held. The site of Mburambazi is symbolically known as ‘the chair of death’ because of a deadly roadblock that the genocide perpetrators had installed there to block the passage and all means of life against the Tutsi who were the target of genocide.

The commemoration service, the fifth stage, is officiated by Church Ministers. It follows a prescribed liturgy of genocide commemoration, which is informed by a theology of repentance, forgiveness, resurrection, faithfulness of God, and some messages of consolation and hope. Those messages are not only mediated by various prayers, songs, sermons, testimonials and speeches, but also by symbolic objects (the memorial site, flowers, pictures, colors, and dressing style) and actions (silence, inclination before the tomb, and laying wreaths on the memorial sites).

The last stage, the closing rituals, does not only consist of sending and blessing the congregation but also of a hand washing ritual through which participants wash their hands with water and share drinks and food or snacks.

5 Constituents, meanings and functions of genocide commemoration

Chapter 5 addresses the second research question: What are the constituting elements of the genocide commemoration and how are they appropriated by participants? The research findings have demonstrated that the commemoration of genocide performed at EPR Kirinda is a mixture of politics, Christianity, and precolonial Rwandan traditions. It is held in the former sites of killing that have been transformed into the sites of genocide commemoration. During the time of commemorative rituals, symbolic objects include colors (black, white, gray, and purple), flowers, water, memorials, the mourning fire, candles, crosses, pictures, and banners. The symbolic actions encompass marching, silence, hand washing, and laying wreaths at the bottom of memorials or on the tombs of genocide victims. Another symbolic action consists of throwing flowers in the River of Nyabarongo, which is considered as a symbolic cemetery for the Tutsi who were thrown into it. Furthermore, part of the genocide commemoration involves many and long speeches that are issued by government officials, church leaders and the representative of genocide survivors, songs, prayers, and poems. There are also testimonials and confessions which are respectively delivered by the genocide survivors and perpetrators.

The meanings of the genocide commemoration performed at EPR Kirinda are multiple. It expresses solidarity and empathy with the genocide survivors, and is also an expression of honor to the dead and a means of restoring their dignity. These conclusions are particularly drawn from the meanings of flowers together with accompanying words and actions. Moreover, the commemoration of genocide is an opportunity for relatives to keep the memory and the presence of the deceased within their respective families alive by way of remembrance.

Whereas Christianity believes in the bodily resurrection and eternal life guaranteed by God who raised Christ from the dead (Romans 8:11), after-death life is for African people guaranteed by remembrance. In that sense, the doctrine of resurrection is a new lens of seeing suffering and death. It has the meaning of victory over suffering, death, fear, and then hope in future encounters with those who passed away.

This chapter also provides insights in the meaning of colors. Apart from the meanings of bereavement (gray, purple, black) and a promising transition from earth to heaven (white), these colors reflect some forms of power relations. In fact, the preservation of church colors (purple) in the face of the governmental color (gray) and community colors (white, black) embodies certain forms of symbolic power struggles among the Government of Rwanda (reaffirmation of its control over memorial spaces), the church hierarchy (symbolic resistance to change and preservation of church traditions) and the local community (to challenge top-down imposition of symbols and meanings).

This study has demonstrated that the commemoration of genocide has six main functions, which are interdependent. Those are the functions of (1) keeping the dead alive by ways of remembrance, (2) accomplishing missed funeral rituals, (3) purifying the community from the uncleanness brought by

bloodshed and death, (4) a sacrificial function of reconciling ritual participants to God, (5) a healing function by awakening and nurturing hope, processing hurt memories, and educating individual and collective memories, and (6) a reconciliatory function by ways of symbolic reparation and the restoration of relationships at different levels of relational harmony.

6 Further reflections on the research findings with regard to reconciliation

Chapter 6 responds to the third research question: How can the genocide commemoration be analyzed with regard to reconciliation? By confronting empirical data and existing literature on genocide commemoration and reconciliation, I have identified five categories of reconciliation, which are linked to each other.

For the first category of reconciliation with oneself (inner healing), the genocide commemoration does not only offer possibilities for symbolic processing of traumatic memories, but also communicates a message of hope that reconnects the concerned persons to a promising future. Thus, through this temporal reconnection, God's promises are made present to mobilize personal inner energies in the present life struggles.

Concerning the second category of reconciliation with others, the commemoration of genocide has the function of symbolic reparation of broken relationships through public acknowledgement of the harm done and commitment to change. Above that, the genocide commemoration is a collaborative ritual that gathers different categories of people. By coming together, stereotypes and prejudices are reduced, and social distances bridged. This study has also established that the commemorative rituals are learning spaces that promote the Rwandan discourse of unity and reconciliation by focusing on a national identity and biblical values of Christian unity and respect of humans as beings who were created in the image of God (Genesis 1: 27).

As far as the third category of reconciliation with God is concerned, the commemoration of genocide fulfills a sacrificial function by presenting the community sins to God and by proclaiming his forgiveness in the name of Jesus Christ. From an African perspective, the research findings have indicated that the concept of sin is defined as any disturbance of the relational harmony by violating the norms and taboos established by God and/or by the ancestors. Thus, the wrong actions, like killing, division and discrimination, rape, looting, damaging the properties of others, revenge, lying, failure to help others, and other similar actions and omissions, are considered as sins against the community even when they have been committed against individuals. Therefore, the community is the starting point of reconciliation with God. For Africans, there can be no reconciliation with God without prior reconciliation with fellow human beings who are considered as symbolic representations of invisible God in the visible world. This point is consistent with the words of Jesus Christ as written in Mathew 5: 23-24: "If you bring your gift to the altar, and there you remember that your brother has something

against you, leave there your gift before the altar and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift”. This biblical passage asks Christians to repair their relationships with other people before turning to God. In other terms, reconciliation with fellow human beings is a precondition for reconciliation with God.

With regard to the fourth category of reconciliation with the living dead, the genocide commemoration appeases the dead by accomplishing the missed funeral rituals (the mourning fire, color gray, black or purple, burial of found bodies), allowing symbolic encounters with the dead, and granting them a continuous remembrance to avoid extinction of their names and deeds. In doing so, the living believe that the departed will not only have a favorable return in the families to which they used to belong, but also will play a good mediation between the living and God. Since Africans believe that the offended or neglected dead can revenge by causing misfortune such as sicknesses, losses and anticipated death, a dignified treatment of dead bodies and scrupulous maintenance of good relationships with the departed are necessary to appease them.

Fifth and last, this dissertation gives due attention to the category of reconciliation with the non-human nature by demonstrating how the genocide commemoration reconciles genocide survivors with the hostile spaces. By transforming the former sites of killing into the spaces of genocide commemoration, those sites become important spaces for memorization and symbolic contacts between the living and the dead. For that reason, they are preserved as intimate spaces that hold the bodies of genocide victims, and places of symbolic encounters with the dead. Furthermore, by ways of liturgical prayers and hand washing ritual, the genocide commemoration cleanses the community and the spaces that have been contaminated by bloodshed and death to make them livable again.

7 General conclusion and perspectives

After responding to the questions that have guided this study, chapter 7 recapitulates the key research findings and expands horizons for further studies. Apart from reiterating the structure, meanings, functions, and reconciliation potentials of the genocide commemoration that was performed at EPR Kirinda, this chapter puts much emphasis on the challenges associated with the genocide commemoration and the way forward to address them. In addition, this concluding section isolates the specific contribution of this dissertation to the body of knowledge and areas for further studies.

7.1 Challenges and way forward

This research confirms that, like other rituals, the genocide commemoration is also ambivalent. Thus, besides its positive appreciation, this study has identified four key challenges to be addressed. First, the issue of missing dead bodies is still very critical to the national program of unity and reconciliation. Second, the genocide commemoration is not only a source of secondary victimization for genocide

survivors, but also of frustration for the genocide perpetrators, and traumatization for the new generations who have never experienced the crime of genocide. Third, the politicization of public commemorations limits free expression of hurt memories since each speaker uses calculated words that fit the national discourse of unity and reconciliation. Last, within the Presbyterian Church in Rwanda, the prescribed liturgy of genocide commemoration does not provide clear guidelines on the stages of genocide commemoration and on the use of ritual symbols.

To address those challenges, this study recommends four strategies. First, a continuous collaboration between different participants would help establish truth on genocide and discovery of missing bodies. Second, further decentralization of commemorative rituals by transforming existing grassroots home-based churches into intimate and less politicized spaces of genocide commemoration would boost genuine repentance and forgiveness in the arenas of political influence and/or fear of subsequent legal accountability. Third, the church should enhance formal psychosocial and spiritual care as an additional contribution to addressing the question of long-lasting trauma and secondary victimization. Last, the liturgy of genocide commemoration should be revised to provide comprehensive guidelines. In this regard, the findings of this study may shed light on its revision and its use.

7.2 The contribution to the body of knowledge and areas for further studies

Chapter 7 has also highlighted the specific contribution of this study to the fields of memory studies, genocide studies, transitional justice, and reconciliation. In fact, this research, which is the first attempt to approach the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi from a liturgical ritual perspective, is itself both a commemorative practice and a memorial space. It is a collection of various materials (testimonials, speeches, lists of names, pictures, texts, prayers, songs, and meanings) associated with the genocide. In other words, by conducting this research, I gave shape to the memory of genocide by ways of gathering empirical data and writing a book that will be part of the material symbols of genocide.

Whereas former studies claim that the Western colonizers and missionaries have uprooted African religions and societies, this study demonstrates that Christianity did not really supplant the precolonial African traditions. Instead, it has brought new ingredients that were mixed with African beliefs and practices to make a hybrid culture (a combination of traditions and discourses). This is consistent with the Rwandan proverb of “mixing sorghum and sacraments.” This post-missionary adage means that the Rwandan people did not abandon their traditional beliefs and practices in the face of Christianity. Instead, the Pre-Christian rituals (referring to sorghum as an important ritual ingredient in Rwandan culture) and Christianity (represented by the sacraments) are intermingled. This point is empirically supported by the blend of Christian elements (the biblical narratives of liberation, God’s faithfulness, Jesus’ passion and resurrection), western (flowers, candles, color purple), and African traditions (the mourning fire, hand washing) in a Christian ritual of genocide commemoration that is annually performed at EPR Kirinda. In addition, some of the traditions are common for both

Christianity and Precolonial Rwandan culture (black and gray as symbols of bereavement, death as a transition from the physical to the spiritual mode of being, after-death life, and the importance of remembrance). Whereas remembrance of the dead is for an African limited to the family lineage, this research reveals that the church is an extended community that includes the living and the dead beyond the boundaries of a particular family. As a result, the church is considered as a Christian family who can commemorate the non-kin dead to prolong their lives in the other world.

The genocide commemoration performed at EPR Kirinda is a tangible case to confirm the selective nature of commemorative rituals. This is to say that, in post-conflict societies, the past is recalled and interpreted according to the political tendencies of those in power and the present-day needs of the commemorative community. Whereas in the pre-genocide Rwanda, the past was seen through the lenses of division and discrimination, the post-genocide Rwanda focuses on unity and reconciliation. This national discourse regarding genocide commemoration (building national identity over the divisive identities of Twa, Hutu, and Tutsi) has a great impact on the local and particular commemorations.

By seeing the genocide commemoration through the lenses of African worldview, this study provides a comprehensive perspective of reconciliation. Since any breach in relational harmony interrupts the whole system of relationships, reconciliation consists of restoring and maintaining the balance between different elements of the universe (humans, things, spirits, and other immaterial beings) whereby the community is the starting point. More importantly, this study has integrated the category of reconciliation with the dead in the reconciliation framework. In this regard, the commemoration of genocide creates a liminal space for a symbolic encounter and reconciliation between the living and the dead. In that liminal space, the living can speak to the dead, offer gifts of love, gratitude and appeasement, repent to them, and ask forgiveness for past wrong doing or failure to give them due respect. In doing so, the survivors are ensured that the departed will have a favorable regard toward them.

This study recommends three main areas for future research. First, I suggest to explore the question of competing memories and their effect on the process of unity and reconciliation in post-genocide Rwanda. Those memories consist of controversial narratives of the past whereby the national reconciliatory memory is conflicting with the theory of double genocide which is supported by some of the Rwandan politicians who are operating outside of Rwanda. According to the Rwandan law on the crime of genocide and other related offenses, published in the Official Gazette of the Republic of Rwanda N°43bis of 28/10/2013, supporting a double genocide theory for Rwanda qualifies as an offense of genocide denial that must be addressed and punished.

Second, I suggest to look at how the genocide perpetrators can be effectively involved in the commemorative rituals and how those rituals can allow them to get reconciled with the dead (the victims of their crimes). Last, I suggest to explore how the perpetrators can effectively cope with guilt

and be re-integrated in the community after being released from the prison. The second and third suggestions for future research could be part of ‘perpetrator studies’, which is a research domain that focusses on the perpetrators of genocide and other forms of violence to explore their role and motivations of being involved in those crimes, their contribution to the process of unity and reconciliation, and how they deal with guilt.