Breaking the Silence: Rwandan Women Survivors Give Testimony and Find a Voice

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This article is part of an E-IR series marking the twentieth commemoration of the Rwandan Genocide.

As the commemoration events marking 20 years since the 1994 genocide take place this April, Rwandans reflect on the impact of this 100-day period in which mass-violence claimed the lives of around 800,000 people. Much has changed since 1994 and few would have predicted the stability, prosperity and improved gender relations seen in Rwanda since the genocide. Yet critics of Paul Kagame's regime argue that, beneath the surface, Rwandan society remains volatile and this is exacerbated by a lack of free speech. Many argue that the government imposes silence on the Rwandan population. Filip Reyntjens, for example, refers to the government as a "dictatorship" which seeks to gain "full control over people and space."[i] It is true that, since 1994, the Rwandan government has added new crimes such as "divisionism" and "ethnic ideology" to the penal code. Although the use of the terms "Hutu" and "Tutsi" is not explicitly forbidden, as Nigel Eltringham observes, "Rwandans interpret these laws as mostly requiring public silence regarding ethnicity."[ii] But the silence observed among Rwandans is not exclusively state-imposed.

In her interviews with convicted *génocidaires*, Tutsi returnees, and Tutsi survivors, Susanne Buckley-Zistel found that many were silent on historical matters, particularly the causes of the genocide and previous episodes of violence between Hutu and Tutsi. Rather than an attempt to conform to a dictatorial state, Buckley-Zistel argues that this "chosen amnesia" is a "strategy for local coexistence" among these groups. Indeed, Jennie Burnet found that Rwandans were often unwilling to discuss any traumatic memories, including those of the genocide itself, for fear of reprisals from those who perpetrated the crimes.[iii] This is particularly the case among women who experienced sexual violence during the genocide. While some fear retribution, others who suffered sexual abuse may be reluctant to reveal their experiences for fear of rejection from their families or the wider community because of the stigmatisation that surrounds victims of rape and sexual violence.[iv] Burnet suggests that Rwandan women in general engage in silence as a coping mechanism for dealing with painful and traumatic memories to avoid being perceived as psychologically unstable and to conform to conventional gender roles.[v] Based on these observations, it might appear that a "culture of silence" has emerged in Rwanda since the 1994 genocide, particularly among women.

Drawing on research on women's testimonies from the Genocide Archive of Rwanda, this article will demonstrate that this culture of silence is not universal but dependent on context. The women who give their testimonies to the Genocide Archive of Rwanda are often willing to address issues such as ethnicity, pre-genocide history, the genocide, sexual violence, emotional difficulties and even the government, suggesting that external factors (such as fear, coercion or social pressures) are preventing them from doing so in other situations. The Genocide Archive of Rwanda was established by Rwanda's National Commission for the Fight Against Genocide (CNLG) in association with the Aegis Trust, a Nottinghamshire-based NGO which works to prevent genocide. Since 2004, the archive has been collecting audio-visual testimonies from survivors from a broad range of demographic groups and geographical locations. All those who have given their testimonies did so voluntarily and signed consent forms for their testimonies to be used in the public archive. The interviews are conducted in Kinyarwanda by survivors working for the archive. Rather than steer the survivor toward or away from certain topics, the interviewer intervenes minimally, using open-ended questions which encourage survivors to speak at length about their experiences before, during and after the

genocide. In the following analysis of issues on which Rwandans are usually observed to be silent, this article will show that the Genocide Archive of Rwanda provides female survivors with a means to break this silence.

Breaking the Silence on Government

Many scholars are critical of the Rwandan government for its authoritarian regime and the lack of free speech in Rwanda, particularly the freedom to criticise the government.[vi] For example, it is well documented that dissident Hutu politicians and members of civil society have been killed, arrested or removed from leadership positions.[vii] The lack of free speech has also been observed among Tutsi genocide survivors who, according to Reyntjens, feel that they have become "second-rate citizens who have been sacrificed by the RPF."[viii] For example, survivors involved in civil society have faced government intimidation and harassment. In the in the late 1990s, the umbrella group for genocide survivor organisations, IBUKA (Kinyarwanda for "Remember"), became increasingly critical of the Rwandan government's neglect of genocide survivors, particularly the lack of economic opportunities for survivors.[ix] Following these criticisms, many prominent figures associated with IBUKA were either assassinated or detained by government officials, or fled the country.[x] A member of the central committee of the RPF, Antoine Mugesera, has now taken over the presidency of IBUKA and, according to Timothy Longman, the organisation has since "largely followed the RPF line."[xi] In Paul Gready's view, many civil society organisations now "act as mouthpieces for the government" and have become "monitory and control devices" used to "prevent independent civil society from emerging."[xii] Reyntjens goes so far as to say that "'civil society' is controlled by the regime."[xiii]

As a member of Rwanda's civil society, the Aegis Trust may also be under the control of the Rwandan government. Indeed, it was especially selected by the government to establish and manage the Kigali Genocide Memorial Centre and the Genocide Archive of Rwanda and must, therefore, toe the government line if it is to maintain this privileged position.[xiv] However, the archive is given a degree of autonomy from governmental control, as the primary purpose of collecting testimonies is to provide survivors with the opportunity to record their experiences without coercion or intimidation from others. In this context, some survivors who give their testimonies appear willing to criticise the government. Emerthe, for example, is critical of the government's handling of national reconciliation, and highlights the lack of choices faced by survivors on this matter:

Now, just because the Government says, "Reconcile," then we reconcile because there's no choice. What would you do? Nothing. If they say, "Let's unite," we unite. But it's not real.[xv]

Her ironic tone clearly mocks the government's authoritarian style, its policies of unity and reconciliation, and the superficiality of her compliance ("it's not real"). This testimony is nonetheless accessible to anyone who visits the archive and was also selected by the archive for translation into English for the Shoah Foundation's "Witness for Humanity" project, an international exhibition on genocide. This demonstrates the relative autonomy of the archive given that, despite Emerthe's critical tone, it has made her testimony accessible to both the national and international public.

Breaking the Silence on the Genocide and its History

Another issue on which silence has been observed among Rwandans is that of history. Yet unlike the "chosen amnesia" observed by Buckley-Zistel, many survivors discuss in detail in their testimonies the previous outbreaks of violence that took place before the genocide. One of the significant factors about the testimonies housed in the Genocide Archive of Rwanda is that the interviews were conducted by survivors rather than by academics, journalists or foreigners. As Buckley-Zistel intimates, her position as an outsider, and more importantly as a foreign researcher, may have limited the responses she was given in interviews as interviewees may have hidden their true beliefs or feelings.[xvi] An analysis of the content of the archival testimonies suggests that "chosen amnesia" is dependent on context. Spéciose, for example, recalls "the events of 1960, 1961, and 1963." "Then too," she explains, "it was the Hutu who were killing the Tutsi, burning their houses and eating their cows. But the events I remember with the most precision are those of 1973. I was a teenager. It was once again Hutu killing Tutsi, destroying their houses and causing displacement." Thus, Spéciose clearly recalls previous episodes of violence between Hutu and Tutsi suggesting that the silence observed by Buckley-Zistel on such historical events depends on

the situation. It would appear that within the context of giving their testimonies, many survivors feel free to discuss outbreaks of pre-genocide violence.

Survivors of the genocide are also thought to be silent when it comes to accusing others of crimes of genocide. There is a genuine threat of reprisals to those survivors who have sought justice through Gacaca.[xvii] Sara, for example, explains her frustration at the silence of others on such issues:

There are some people who won't even give their testimony. If you give it, people accuse you of slandering them… There are survivors who are afraid of accusing killers and instead call them innocent.

Many of the women who have given their testimonies to the Genocide Archive of Rwanda openly name individuals involved in the killing, but it is true that this remains dangerous. For example, Rose has denounced perpetrators who now hold positions of power in Rwanda, both in her testimony and in Gacaca, and has consequently had several attempts on her life.[xviii] She has even named individuals responsible for crimes of rape and sexual violence, which is a particularly taboo topic in Rwanda because of the stigma associated with its victims.

Breaking the Silence on Sexual Violence

Sexual violence was widespread during the genocide. A report by the Organisation of African Unity suggests that almost all females who survived were the direct victims of rape or were affected by sexual violence in some way.[xix] Survivors of sexual violence have been reported to perceive themselves as dirty, morally inferior and ashamed.[xx] The negative stereotypes associated with victims of sexual violence can lead to discrimination, causing them to be ostracised and excluded from both their families and communities.[xxi] As a consequence of the stigma surrounding sexual violence, many survivors are reluctant to admit to having been sexually assaulted.[xxii] Yet despite the danger of reprisals and the enormous stigma that surrounds victims, many women's testimonies describe experiences of sexual violence during the genocide. Rose, for example, describes how she was repeatedly raped throughout the genocide and was held as a sex slave by a local Hutu politician. Following the genocide, she co-founded an association of genocide widows and has become the elected representative of Genocide Survivors in the Mukura Sector (Southern Province). Whenever she has the opportunity, Rose speaks out about issues of genocide and rape on the television, on the radio and in local speeches, despite the fact that this is putting her life in danger. By recording her testimony with the Genocide Archive of Rwanda, Rose has found yet another outlet for discussing these issues, and she demonstrates her continued commitment to speaking out: "I will keep on saying what I know [about those who committed rape]… There is no day I will hide it." While many women undoubtedly find these issues difficult to discuss in public, the Genocide Archive of Rwanda provides women who do want to discuss rape and sexual violence with a platform to do so. On a more general level, giving their testimonies provides women with the opportunity to break free from what might be considered socially appropriate female behaviour.

Gender and Silence

According to Burnet, gender distinctions in Rwanda play on dialectical male/female roles. "Women," she notes, "are viewed positively when they are reserved, submissive, modest, silent, and maternal."[xxiii] They are "viewed negatively when they gossip, are loud and overly emotional."[xxiv] Burnet also observes how outspokenness and aggression are "objectionable in a woman."[xxv] Yet, as Kalí Tal argues, the very act of bearing witness is an aggressive one, "born out of a refusal to bow to outside pressure to revise or to repress experience, a decision to embrace conflict rather than conformity, to endure a lifetime of anger and pain rather than to submit to the seductive pull of revision and repression."[xxvi] Similarly, Alexandre Dauge-Roth notes how, through testimony, witnesses may "reclaim on their own terms the meaning of their survival" enabling survivors to "move from a position of being subjected to political violence to a position that entails the promise of agency."[xxvii] By testifying, survivors are able to contest the status quo and gain a voice with potential transformative power, interrupting the dominant understanding of events among a given audience.

These women thus appear to depart from conventional female behaviour just through giving their testimonies. Moreover, many of the women go further and emphasise the absolute necessity of having their voices heard. Rose,

for example, believes that survivors like her have a duty to provide an accurate account of historical events: "There are things we can do for our country. There is the truth that we have to speak out so that our country can have true justice. That information is needed from the survivors." Sara shares this commitment, stating that it "would be the greatest mistake to keep quiet about what happened here in Rwanda. Nobody could train me to do that because I can't keep quiet." For Laetitia, the need to record the testimonies of survivors goes beyond speaking out at the national level, but is necessary for fighting genocide on an international scale:

Rwandans should help the world by sharing our history with the rest of the world, tell them how things really are to help the world not repeat the mistakes made here… The way I see it, there is no other way of fighting the genocide unless we show how it took place.

Conclusion

These testimonies demonstrate that Rwandan women are willing to speak out and actively shape public discourse on such issues as the government, ethnicity, pre-genocide history, the genocide or sexual violence. Thus, for all the criticisms that Rwanda receives for its imposed culture of silence and lack of free speech, the testimonies housed in the Genocide Archive of Rwanda suggest that this is not universally the case. There are a few platforms in Rwanda where free speech prevails, although undoubtedly more are needed.

Notes

[i] Filip Reyntjens, "Constructing the Truth, Dealing with Dissent, Domesticating the World: Governance in Post-Genocide Rwanda," *African Affairs* 110: 438 (2010), 2.

[ii] Nigel Eltringham, "The Past is Elsewhere: The Paradoxes of Proscribing Ethnicity in Post-Genocide Rwanda," *Remaking Rwanda: State Building and Human Rights after Mass Violence* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011), 274.

[iii] Burnet includes reprisals for the crimes committed by RPF soldiers during the Rwandan civil war (1990-1994) and after. Jennie E. Burnet, *Genocide Lives in Us: Women, Memory and Silence in Rwanda* (Madison, Wisconsin: Wisconsin University Press, 2012), 117.

[iv] Heather B. Hamilton, "Rwanda's Women: The Key to Reconstruction," *The Journal of Humanitarian Assistance*, (2000), 4.

[v] Burnet, 78.

[vi] Timothy Longman and Théoneste Rutagengwa, "Memory, Identity, and Community in Rwanda,"*My Neighbour, My Enemy: Justice and Community in the Aftermath of Mass Atrocity* (Cambridge University Press, 2004), 162; Gérard Prunier, *From Genocide to Continental War: The 'Congolese' Conflict and the Crisis of Contemporary Africa* (London: Hurst Publishers Ltd., 2009), 23; Filip Reyntjens, "Rwanda, Ten Years On: From Genocide to Dictatorship," *African Affairs*, 103:411 (2004), 208.

[vii] Timothy Longman, "Limitations to Political Reform: The Undemocratic Nature of Transition in Rwanda,"*Remaking Rwanda: State Building and Human Rights after Mass Violence* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011), 30; Longman and Rutagengwa, 162.

[viii] Reyntjens, "Rwanda, Ten Years On," 180. The Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) is the current ruling political party of Rwanda. It was created by exiled Tutsi refugees living in Uganda who had fled the violence of the 1960s in Rwanda. Today, it is principally made up of Tutsi returnees, that is, the Tutsi refugees who returned to Rwanda after the genocide. This group is distinct from Tutsi survivors, who are members of the same ethnic group but who, for the

most part, have not lived in exile.

[ix] Longman, "Limitations to Political Reform," 30.

[x] For details, see Ibid., 30

[xi] Ibid., 31.

[xii] Paul Gready, "Beyond 'You're with Us or against Us': Civil Society and Policymaking in Post-Genocide Rwanda," *Remaking Rwanda: State Building and Human Rights after Mass Violence* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011), 90.

[xiii] Reyntjens, "Rwanda, Ten Years On," 185.

[xiv] To promote a unified national identity, the government endorses a particular interpretation of historical events, according to which, Rwandan society was essentially unified before the arrival of European colonists who racialised the Tutsi, Hutu and Twa social categories. The official version of history holds that before colonisation, these groups had limited social significance and referred merely to occupational categories rather than social status and all citizens were unified by religion, language and loyalty to the (Tutsi) king. According to the official narrative, colonial policies of divide and rule were principally responsible for creating division among Rwandan people, and thus the genocide constitutes a mere aberration in Rwanda's peaceful and united history and the violence was caused by external forces. While not entirely inaccurate, the official narrative may also be seen as a form of system legitimation as it posits that a strong Tutsi leader is 'natural' or 'Rwandan', as this was the way things were before the arrival of outsiders. The exhibition in the Kigali Genocide Memorial Centre is consistent with this official narrative.

[xv] All the testimonies cited in this article come from the Genocide Archive of Rwanda and have been translated into English for a project called 'Witness for Humanity', an exhibition on genocide developed by the Shoah Foundation at the University of Southern California (https://sfi.usc.edu/).

[xvi] Susanne Buckley-Zistel, "Remembering to Forget: Chosen Amnesia as a Strategy for Local Coexistence in Post-Genocide Rwanda," *Africa: The Journal of the International African Institute*, 76:2 (2006), 133.

[xvii] Gacaca is the national system of community courts which was designed by the government to carry out transitional justice using popular participation.

[xviii] As a result of her outspoken comments about sexual violence and genocide, as well as her denouncement of people in positions of power, Rose now has to live in a military camp in Butare because her life is in danger.

[xix] Organisation of African Unity, *Rwanda: The Preventable Genocide* (Addis Ababa, Ethiopia: OAU, 2000), 16.20.

[xx] Donatilla Mukamana and Petra Brysiewicz, "The Lived Experience of Genocide Rape Survivors in Rwanda," *Journal of Nursing Scholarship*, 40:4 (2008), 380–383.

[xx] Amnesty International, *Rwanda: "Marked for Death": Rape Survivors Living with HIV/AIDS* (2004), 25.

[xxi] Amnesty International, 7; Hamilton, 4; Mukamana and Brysiewicz, 380–383.

[xxii] Hamilton, 4.

[xxiii] Burnet, 44.

[xxiv] Ibid., 44.

[xxv] Ibid., 45.

[xxvi]Kalí Tal, *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literature of Trauma* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 7.

[xxvii] Alexandre Dauge-Roth, *Writing and Filming the Genocide of the Tutsis in Rwanda: Dismembering and Remembering Traumatic History* (Lanham/Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2010), 42.

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Caroline Williamson works in the Department of French and Francophone Studies at the University of Nottingham. Her research interests include trauma in postcolonial contexts, post-traumatic growth, and group dynamics in post-conflict societies. Her particular area of expertise is Rwanda, having recently completed a PhD examining the impact of the 1994 genocide on Rwandan women's lives and identities. This project, funded by an AHRC Collaborative Doctoral Award, was conducted in partnership with the Aegis Trust, a charity which campaigns against genocide and crimes against humanity, and which runs the Kigali Genocide Memorial Centre and Genocide Archive of Rwanda. She also recently contributed 'Can living through genocide lead to positive change?' to the *Africa at LSE* blog.