



Restorative Justice and Post-Genocide Reconciliation

Ethical Implications
and Community Healing in Rwanda

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Keywords

Rwanda, community healing, justice, peace process, post-war care, genocide

Abstract

This paper explores the role of restorative justice in post-genocide reconciliation in Rwanda, focusing on its ethical implications and impact on community healing. Following the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi, Rwanda faced the challenge of addressing survivors' trauma, fostering national unity, and reconciling a divided society. Key initiatives, including the Gacaca court system, emphasized dialogue, accountability, and forgiveness to promote healing. Using restorative justice and social reconstruction theories as its conceptual frameworks, this study examines how restorative justice fosters trust, dignity, and relationship restoration, while addressing ethical challenges. Also, through a desk review of existing literature, reports, and case studies, this study synthesizes key findings on the effectiveness of restorative justice.

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1. Introduction

In the aftermath of the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda, the country had many challenges caused by that tragedy of the century which caused the death of over one million of people, a big number of orphans and widows, the destruction of infrastructures, de displacement of refugees among many others. In response, Rwanda embarked in a time of restoration of the fractured nation. The reconciliation process and the national unity have been used as the main tools of the restorative justice (Cohen, S., & O'Rourke, D., 2011). Central to this effort was the Gacaca court system, a traditional community-based judicial process designed to facilitate dialogue, promote accountability, and encourage forgiveness between perpetrators and survivors (Nzabonimpa, F., 2014).

However, while the Rwandan government's approach to post-genocide justice and reconciliation has been widely lauded for its innovative use of community-based justice, questions remain about the true nature of reconciliation and the ethical implications of the restorative justice processes employed (Clark, 2010) (Huysse, L., 2008). While restorative justice generally emphasizes repairing harm, restoring relationships, and promoting collective healing, it is important to critically evaluate how these ideals translate into the Rwandan context. How do relationships between perpetrators and victims evolve today? What ethical challenges arise from these relationships, and what are the narratives that remain silenced in the pursuit of national unity? Furthermore, where are the fractures in Rwandan society that continue to shape collective memory and ongoing reconciliation efforts?

This paper presents an essay that answers a question about how Restorative Justice functions as a mechanism for reconciliation in post-genocide Rwanda, highlighting its ethical implications for healing and the restoration of relationships. Restorative justice is interpreted in various ways. For some, it primarily involves an encounter process where stakeholders collaboratively decide what actions are needed to address the harm caused by a crime. For others, it represents an alternative conception of justice that prioritizes healing and repairing harm over punitive measures. It is also viewed as a value-driven approach emphasizing cooperation, respect, and reparative

conflict resolution. Some advocate for its broader application, calling for transformative societal structures and relationships. Ultimately, restorative justice offers a hopeful vision that even in the aftermath of tragedy, healing and positive change are achievable through intentional and restorative practices (Johnstone, G., & Van Ness, D. (Eds.), 2006).

By providing an in-depth analysis of the evolving relationships between perpetrators and victims, the ethical dimensions of restorative justice, and the state of reconciliation in Rwanda today, this paper aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of post-conflict healing. The findings will also offer insights into the broader application of restorative justice principles in other post-conflict societies, providing valuable lessons that can be adapted to different cultural and historical contexts (Van der Merwe, H., 2009).

2. Background of the Study

The 1994 genocide against Tutsi involved a lot of atrocities: killings, rape and stalling were committed. According to the UN outreach program, during the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda, more than one million Tutsi, as well as moderate Hutu who opposed the atrocities, were killed by Hutu extremists. Additionally, approximately 250,000 women were subjected to rape, and the country's infrastructure and developmental progress were devastated (Dallaire, R., 2004).

The Government of Rwanda led by RPF started giving justice to those who sought it and made accountable everyone who had been involved in the 1994 genocide against Tutsi. At the beginning, more than 120,000 people have been arrested accused of participating in the killing, many others joined them in the jail (United Nations, 2014).

The country had a big number of wounded survivors. To deal with the big number of offenders and to heal the wounds of the survivors, a serious judicial system was needed at that time. The restorative justice played a significant role in uniting the community. Rwanda's genocide has led to social fragmentation, emphasizing the need for social capital reinforcement through

inclusive practices and restorative justice initiatives for community healing (Brown, 2020).

3. Literature Review

Restorative justice as a way to genocide recidivism prevention

Central to the restorative justice process in Rwanda is the principle of acknowledgment and truth-telling. In Gacaca courts, survivors have the opportunity to share their experiences, while perpetrators confess their crimes. This dynamic fosters a validating environment for victims, affirming their experiences and promoting accountability (Clark, 2010). Acknowledgment of harm is crucial for healing; it allows victims to process their trauma and facilitates a shared understanding of the past among community members (Schaal, S., et al., 2012).

Restorative justice, rather than punishment, conceives of justice as “repair” to the harm caused by crime and conflict. In the context of Rwanda, that kind of justice was needed to handle various challenges left by the 1994 genocide against Tutsi. The first action undertaken by the Government of Rwanda was to end impunity and make everyone accountable of his/her actions, not only for punishing but also to plan ahead on how punishment may be effective, with a moral lesson to the perpetrators. The Government of Rwanda introduced a system of repentance in the Gacaca court system and other judicial court system towards the national reconciliation.

The second way used by the Government of Rwanda is the community service for common interest known as TIG “*Travaux d'intérêt général*”. In fact, TIG is a Rwandan program allowing people found guilty of participating in the 1994 genocide against Tutsi to serve part of their sentences doing community services as an alternative penalty to imprisonment. It's a good way of rectification, correction, and integration to the convicts by reducing the time they should spend in incarceration and to contribute to the development of the country (Twagirayezu A., 2022). TIG is a good opportunity for the convict of 1994 to show that they should be useful to the

community no matter what they did in the past, it is also a way of reconciliation with the victims’ families and the society.

The third strategies conducted by the Government of Rwanda is the formation of the National Unity and Reconciliation Commission (NURC) as aimed avoiding the genocide recidivism. The commission has been created in March 1999 by a Parliamentary law to promote unity and reconciliation among Rwandans in the aftermath of the 1994 genocide. The aim of the NURC was facilitating with civic education, conflict management and peace building in Rwanda.

The fourth strategy of the Government of Rwanda is the Gacaca court. According to the Rwandan Education Board (Rwanda Education Board: REB, 2020):

“ The term Gacaca refers to a physical green space where people used to meet. It was especially used by elders in the community and individuals were well-known for their integrity and wisdom, to discuss and solve problems and conflicts within the community.

In the aftermath of the genocide, the Government of Rwanda imagined strategies in reconstituting the truth of what happened. Those strategies consisted not only in collecting the statistics on the victims of genocide, their names and their identifications, but also circumstances within which they were killed, location of bodies and names of offenders.

“ The International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda spent a lot of time on data collection for witnesses, and hearing from survivors, offenders and bystanders for the sake of reconstituting the truth (Nsengimana, Celestin, 2010).

Justice and reconciliation process in Rwanda

Restorative justice functions as mechanism of reconciliation in post-genocide reconciliation, because during the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, up to one million people were killed, and as many as 250,000 women were raped, leaving the population deeply traumatized and the country’s infrastructure

decimated. The genocide sent shock waves through the international community. In response, Rwanda initiated a comprehensive justice and reconciliation process aimed at rebuilding the nation and fostering peaceful coexistence among its people (Burnet, J. E., 2008).

Gacaca courts as a Rwandan model of restorative justice

Etymologically, the word Gacaca means “on the grass”, and refers to traditional Rwandan conflict resolution practices where community members would gather to discuss disputes. The system was adapted to address the massive backlog of genocide cases. Gacaca courts aimed to provide a platform for truth-telling, promote accountability, and foster community reconciliation. They sought to involve local populations in the judicial process, thereby enhancing community cohesion (Gatwa T. & Mbonyinkebe D. (ed)., 2019). Gacaca is a traditional conflict resolution system for neighbourhood disputes. By extension, it is the name given to new people’s court charged in 2005 with ruling on cases arising from genocide. Practically, Gacaca is carried out by the board of trustees “Inyangamugayo” whom the main role is to pass judgment on the perpetrators of genocide crimes and other crimes against humanity in categories 2 and 3. Gacaca is a traditional community court system that aims at restoring the social fabric of society. With regard to the Post-genocide Rwanda, it provided a means for survivors to learn the truth about the death of their relatives and for perpetrators to confess their crimes and seek forgiveness from their victim’s families, as well as their communities. Gacaca court reduced the hostility and gave space to solve the problems related to genocide in Rwanda (Twagirayezu A., 2022). The Gacaca courts were established to promote accountability, reconciliation, and community healing.

The Gacaca courts and their role in reintegration

Clark (2010) suggests that while the Gacaca courts were successful in promoting confession and fostering accountability, they were also sites of significant emotional and social friction. Many survivors felt that justice was not fully served, especially when perpetrators were able to minimize their guilt or evade more serious punishment. On the other hand, some perpetrators

claimed they had been coerced into participating in the violence and expressed remorse for their actions, but these expressions of contrition were not always perceived as genuine by survivors.

Despite these challenges, the Gacaca courts provided a space for survivors and perpetrators to engage with one another. For some, these encounters allowed survivors to gain a sense of closure and helped rebuild a sense of community through dialogue. However, for others, the reintegration of perpetrators into communities posed a significant barrier to healing. Many survivors expressed difficulty in forgiving those who had destroyed their lives, and living alongside perpetrators often exacerbated feelings of mistrust and anger. The complexity of these interactions underscores the emotional and social difficulties inherent in rebuilding communities after such horrific violence.

How restorative justice functions as a mechanism for reconciliation in post-genocide Rwanda

Restorative justice in post-genocide Rwanda serves as a crucial mechanism for reconciliation by emphasizing dialogue, accountability, and community healing rather than punishment alone. This approach recognizes that crimes are not merely offenses against the state but violations of personal and communal relationships. According to Gatwa & Mbonyinkebe, in Rwanda, restorative justice has been operationalized through Community-Based Courts known as Gacaca Courts and the Abunzi Mediation Committees, which aimed to facilitate truth-telling and foster reconciliation among victims and perpetrators (Gatwa T. & Mbonyinkebe D. (ed.), 2019). With this regard, the post-genocide Rwandan government implemented the Gacaca court system as its primary mechanism for addressing accountability for the genocide. This approach was adopted after the government recognized that the formal criminal justice system lacked the capacity to handle the magnitude of cases and was inadequate for achieving Rwanda’s transitional justice goals (Gahima, G., 2012).

These courts allowed for public hearings where individuals could share their experiences and grievances, promoting a collective understanding of the past and encouraging forgiveness among community members.

Another channel of Restorative Justice in Rwanda as mentioned by these big Rwandan Historians is Genocide Commemoration, where they argue that this period serves to promote reconciliation by reshaping a common identity (Gatwa T. & Mbonyinkebe D. (ed)., 2019). It plays a vital role in the reconciliation process by promoting collective memory, facilitating dialogue, educating future generations, supporting healing, and strengthening national identity. Through these mechanisms, commemoration helps to address the deep scars left by the genocide and paves the way for a more peaceful and unified society.

Efficacy of the Gacaca courts as a restorative justice in Rwanda

The Gacaca courts were adopted as an innovative mechanism to address Rwanda's need for a justice system capable of handling the vast number of crime cases. This approach, rooted in Rwandan cultural heritage, was introduced to manage the challenge posed by the overwhelming number of genocide suspects awaiting trial, which the conventional courts could not process within a reasonable timeframe. Additionally, the Gacaca courts aimed to promote peace, national unity, and reconciliation in a society marred by cycles of violence since 1959. Empowered to handle genocide cases, the Gacaca courts officially closed on 18 June 2012, after trying a total of 1,958,634 cases. Among these, 86% of suspects (1,681,648) were convicted, while 14.1% (277,066) were acquitted. Notably, 13.38% (225,012) of convicts opted for the guilty plea and confession procedure (Clark, 2010; MINIJUST, 2012).

These community-based courts allowed for public trials where victims could confront their perpetrators, and offenders could admit their guilt and seek forgiveness. This process not only provided a platform for storytelling and truth-telling but also encouraged communal participation, thereby rebuilding trust within communities (Gatwa T. & Mbonyinkebe D. (ed)., 2019, p. 96).

Similarly, Rwandans have considered Gacaca courts as a home-grown mechanism of transitional justice. The GoR launched the pilot phase on 18 June 2002, the Gacaca lay judges called “Inyangamugayo” literally “the honest person” or the “person of integrity”. This process of collecting the data about Genocide took a period of two years (2002-2004). Thereafter, the Gacaca courts started judging the suspected genocide perpetrators (Nsengimana C., 2023).

The Gacaca courts had two main objectives: firstly, to document genocide by engaging genocide survivors, perpetrators, and other members of the community in the processes of data collection and validation. Secondly, to establish a home-grown judicial mechanism, not only to respond to the issue of a big number of more than one million suspected offenders who could not be judged by formal court in a reasonable time frame, but also to move from the retributive justice to the restorative justice through truth telling, confession, justice, reparation and forgiveness (Nsengimana C., 2023).

At the beginning, the community didn’t understand Gacaca court in the same way. Some considered it as retributive justice because it had sentences including punishment or life imprisonment, among many others.

Unity and reconciliation efforts in post-genocide Rwanda

Unity and reconciliation in post-genocide Rwanda is more focused on the process of moving from past divided history to a shared present and future in Rwandan society. To achieve unity and reconciliation, some values and principles were introduced, for example, common identity for Rwandans, working towards common interest of the country, fight against genocide and its ideology, emphasis of rule of law governance and human right respect (NURC, 2005).

By establishing the NURC, the GoR aimed at including all Rwandans, despite their ethnic backgrounds. It conducted many activities likely the repatriation and integration of refugees, military integration and the demobilization and reintegration of the ex-combatants both economically and socially (Kanyana G., 2020).

Unity and reconciliation in Rwanda

The reconciliation process in Rwanda aims to reconstruct the Rwandan identity while balancing justice, truth, peace, and security. The Rwandan government has implemented various measures to ensure peaceful coexistence between perpetrators and victims. For instance, the Constitution guarantees equal rights for all citizens, and laws have been enacted to combat discrimination and divisive ideologies. The primary responsibility for overseeing reconciliation efforts lies with the National Unity and Reconciliation Commission (Sasaki, 2009).

Key reconciliation initiatives include *Ingando*, a peace education program conducted in solidarity camps. Between 1999 and 2009, over 90,000 participants engaged in this program, which seeks to clarify Rwanda's history, combat division, foster patriotism, and address genocide ideology (Sasaki, 2009). Another initiative is *Itorero ry'Igihugu*, established in 2007, which aims to instill Rwandan values and train leaders dedicated to community development. From 2007 to 2009, 115,228 participants took part in *Itorero* programs (Sundberg & Sundberg, 2016). Additionally, national summits on topics such as justice, governance, human rights, security, and history have been held regularly since 2000 to support reconciliation efforts (Angelique, 2013).

Rwandan case: Interactions between survivors and perpetrators

After the 1994 genocide, Rwanda embarked on a challenging journey of reconciliation, where survivors and perpetrators were often compelled to live side by side, sometimes in the same neighbourhoods or villages. This proximity is a critical factor in understanding how post-genocide interactions unfold. Scholars have noted that, unlike many other post-genocide contexts, the Rwandan case is unique because survivors and perpetrators did not have the option of fleeing or segregating themselves into separate regions (Uvin, 2009). They were forced to coexist in a landscape marked by deep emotional scars, distrust, and the challenge of rebuilding a nation from the ground up.

The phenomenon of perpetrators living alongside survivors has created a complex dynamic in Rwanda, where the process of healing and reconciliation must occur within the very communities where violence took place. For example, as described by Clark (2010), the Gacaca courts were a local form of justice in which perpetrators were encouraged to confess their crimes before the community and seek forgiveness from survivors. These courts, while central to the national reconciliation agenda, were not without their difficulties. Many survivors struggled with the idea of facing those who had caused them immeasurable harm, and the act of forgiveness, especially when perpetrators remained in close proximity, was emotionally charged and fraught with tension.

- Victim-perpetrator relations: In post-genocide societies, the relationships between victims and perpetrators are often fraught with complexity, shaped by the personal, collective, and political dimensions of the violence that occurred. In Rwanda, the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi not only led to the systematic killing of more than one million people but also shattered familial, communal, and social bonds. The violence was perpetrated by individuals who, in many cases, were neighbours, co-workers, or even family members of the victims. These dynamics present a unique challenge for post-genocide reconciliation, where the restoration of relationships between victims and perpetrators is central to the process of societal healing. Over time, these relationships evolve, influenced by factors such as justice processes, individual and collective trauma, political frameworks, and social and psychological factors. Understanding the dynamics between victims and perpetrators requires a deep exploration of the emotional and social tensions that continue to characterize these relationships long after the violence. This section will explore how these relationships evolve over time, addressing the factors that influence trust-building, the complexity of forgiveness, and the long-term impact of trauma on both parties. Drawing on the work of scholars such as Des Forges (1999), Huyse (2008) and

others, the next section will provide a framework for understanding the ongoing struggles of reconciling these deeply divided groups.

- The complexities of forgiveness and reconciliation: Forgiveness is one of the most difficult and contentious aspects of victim-perpetrator relations in post-genocide societies. Scholars have long debated whether forgiveness is possible, or even desirable, in the context of large-scale atrocities like genocide. In Rwanda, forgiveness has been framed as both a personal and collective necessity for national healing, but it is not a simple or universal process. According to Des Forges (1999), some survivors found it difficult or impossible to forgive the perpetrators of the genocide, especially those who had murdered family members or neighbours. In some cases, the idea of forgiveness was seen as a moral imperative, both for individuals and for the nation, but the emotional reality of this was far more complicated. Huyse (2008) discusses how the discourse of forgiveness was promoted by the Rwandan government as part of the broader reconciliation agenda but acknowledges that forgiveness is not a straightforward emotional or ethical act. While the state and international actors framed forgiveness as part of the healing process, in practice, many survivors felt that forgiveness would mean dismissing their pain and trauma, which they were not prepared to do. For perpetrators, seeking forgiveness was similarly complex. Some expressed genuine remorse, while others resisted fully acknowledging their guilt. Thus, the moral and psychological challenges involved in forgiveness and reconciliation persist long after the formal justice processes have ended.

Restorative justice in Rwanda: The role of the Gacaca courts

In the context of Rwanda's post-genocide recovery, the Gacaca court system represented an innovative application of restorative justice, based on traditional Rwandan community-based dispute resolution practices.

Established in 2001, Gacaca courts were designed to address the overwhelming number of genocide-related cases in a society where the formal judicial system was unable to cope with the scale of the violence. The Gacaca courts allowed local communities to take a central role in the justice process, with community members serving as judges and witnesses, focusing on both the truth and reconciliation processes (Clark, 2010).

The Gacaca system’s core objectives were to uncover the truth about the genocide, foster accountability through confession, and promote reconciliation between perpetrators and victims. Offenders who confessed their crimes and demonstrated remorse were often given reduced sentences or allowed to reintegrate into society (Nzabonimpa, 2014). This system was seen to bring justice closer to the people, allowing for wide participation in the process of healing and rebuilding a divided society (Huysse, 2008).

Restorative justice beyond Rwanda: lessons and limitations

Rwanda’s Gacaca courts are not the only example of restorative justice in post-conflict societies. Other countries, such as South Africa and Sierra Leone, have implemented similar approaches to transitional justice, with varying degrees of success.

- South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC): In South Africa, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) provided amnesty to perpetrators who fully confessed their involvement in human rights violations during the apartheid era. Van der Merwe (2009) notes that the TRC’s combination of restorative justice (in its focus on truth-telling and reconciliation) and retributive justice (through public accountability and the potential for prosecutions) presented a nuanced approach to post-apartheid healing. However, critics argue that the TRC’s emphasis on forgiveness and the granting of amnesty left many victims feeling that justice was not fully served (Mamdani, 2002). Like Gacaca, the TRC sought to balance truth, justice, and reconciliation, but it also struggled

with ensuring that perpetrators were held accountable for their actions.

Sierra Leone's Truth and Reconciliation Commission

Sierra Leone's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) followed a similar model to South Africa's, combining restorative justice with the pursuit of accountability. Pring (2006) highlights that, in Sierra Leone, the TRC's process helped to expose the realities of the civil war and allowed for public testimonies from both victims and perpetrators. However, as Mamdani (2002) points out, the TRC in Sierra Leone struggled to navigate the political dynamics of post-conflict governance, and many perpetrators, especially those involved in the RUF insurgency, were not fully held accountable for their actions. This underscores a key limitation of restorative justice processes: they often face challenges in ensuring full accountability for all perpetrators, particularly in cases of systematic violence or where political interests intervene.

Lessons and limitations:

From the experiences of Rwanda, South Africa, and Sierra Leone, several key lessons can be drawn:

- The Need for a Balanced Approach: Restorative justice processes that prioritize reconciliation and healing must also consider the need for accountability. Both the Gacaca courts and the TRC faced challenges in balancing these goals, with critics arguing that too much emphasis on forgiveness could compromise justice (Van der Merwe, 2009).
- Local vs. National Contexts: The effectiveness of restorative justice mechanisms may depend on the social and political context in which they are implemented. While Gacaca succeeded in Rwanda, it may not be as suitable in contexts where deep ethnic or political divisions persist, as seen in Sierra Leone.
- The Risk of Impunity: One of the main limitations of restorative justice is the potential for impunity. In both Rwanda and South

Africa, critics argued that perpetrators could evade full accountability by confessing and participating in the process of reconciliation (Pring, 2006; Mamdani, 2002).

In conclusion, while restorative justice offers valuable tools for post-conflict societies to heal and rebuild, its implementation must be carefully tailored to the specific needs of each society. Rwanda’s Gacaca courts, like other transitional justice mechanisms, reveal both the promise and the ethical dilemmas inherent in balancing justice and reconciliation in societies emerging from periods of mass violence.

4. Ethical Implications for Healing and Restoration of Relationships

The ethical implications of restorative justice in Rwanda are profound, particularly regarding healing and the restoration of relationships. By prioritizing forgiveness and reconciliation, Restorative justice encourages victims to confront their trauma and seek closure. For instance, survivors noted that forgiveness allowed to move beyond hatred and grief, ultimately leading to a sense of freedom and peace (EVER Rwanda, 2022). This transformative process highlights the ethical dimension of restorative justice, which seeks not only to address the harm caused by genocide but also to rebuild the social fabric of communities torn apart by violence.

Moreover, restorative justice fosters a sense of collective responsibility and community solidarity, which is vital for long-term peace in Rwanda. The Rwandan government has promoted a national identity that transcends ethnic divisions, encouraging citizens to identify as ‘Rwandans’ rather than Hutus or Tutsis. This shift is supported by policies that prohibit ethnic distinctions in public discourse, aiming to cultivate unity and prevent the resurgence of division (EVER Rwanda, 2022). However, some researchers argue that this enforced unity can lead to a suppression of individual narratives and dissent, raising ethical concerns about the authenticity of reconciliation efforts and the potential for repressive peace.

In addition to promoting healing among survivors, restorative justice also addresses the psychological needs of perpetrators. Many individuals convicted of genocide experience significant post-traumatic stress and guilt, complicating their reintegration into society. Programs aimed at fostering recovery capital —such as social, cultural, and human resources— are essential for helping these individuals navigate their trauma and contribute positively to their communities (Frontiers). An example here is *Umucyo Nyanza*, a cooperative mentored by Prof. Kazuyuki Sasaki that brings together Genocide survivors and wives of those who did genocide. They argue that at the beginning it was even very hard to face one another. They were put together to plant and grow flowers. As they were taught that flowers cannot grow when their planters have hatred and unhappiness in them, they began to forgive one another and heal through this motivation of growing flowers. They now testify that they visit one another at home and became good friends. This dual focus on both victims and perpetrators underscores the ethical commitment of restorative justice to holistic healing and the restoration of relationships, emphasizing that reconciliation is a shared responsibility (Sasaki, K., 2009).

5. Challenges of the restorative justice in Rwanda

While Gacaca courts provided a means for justice, they also raised ethical concerns. Critics argue that the emphasis on community involvement sometimes led to mob justice and a lack of legal protections for defendants. Moreover, the pressure on victims to forgive their perpetrators can be ethically problematic, as it may overshadow the individual's need for justice and accountability. Thus, while Gacaca courts aimed to facilitate reconciliation, they also highlighted the complexities of balancing justice and forgiveness (Gatwa T. & Mbonyinkebe D. (ed)., 2019, p. 96). In Rwanda, Community-based projects and collaborative livelihood programs have been shown to significantly improve social cohesion among survivors and perpetrators through initiatives that reinforce social capital (Verduin, F., et al., 2014).

Notwithstanding the favourable outcomes associated with restorative justice in Rwanda, a number of challenges remain. One significant concern is the stigma attached to being a perpetrator of the genocide. Many individuals are subjected to social ostracism and discrimination, which impede their reintegration into communities. This stigma not only affects those directly involved but also impedes the broader reconciliation process, perpetuating divisions and hindering the development of trust.

Therefore, while restorative justice is a valuable approach, it must be integrated into a comprehensive strategy that encompasses systemic reforms aimed at addressing inequalities (Van Ness, 1993, pp. 251-276).

The challenge of rebuilding relationships between victims and perpetrators

Rebuilding relationships between victims and perpetrators is a multifaceted challenge. In Rwanda, this process has been described as a journey that involves reconciliation at both the personal and collective levels (Clark, 2010). While some survivors were able to forgive and rebuild relationships, others remained entrenched in their trauma, unable or unwilling to forgive those who had committed atrocities against them (Mamdani, 2001). The Gacaca courts, which served as community-based judicial system, played a role in facilitating dialogue between perpetrators and victims, but they were not without their own challenges and limitations (Nzabonimpa, 2014).

The reconciliation process, therefore, cannot be understood solely as a top-down political process or a legal one; it involves complex emotional and psychological factors that affect individuals and communities in deeply personal ways. Scholars such as Huyse (2008) highlight the importance of integrating social healing into the broader process of justice and reconciliation, arguing that without the restoration of personal relationships and the rebuilding of trust at the community level, true national reconciliation remains elusive.

6. Conclusion

Restorative justice in post-genocide Rwanda functions as a vital mechanism for reconciliation by fostering dialogue, promoting forgiveness, and rebuilding community ties. Its ethical implications are significant, as it not only facilitates individual healing but also encourages a collective commitment to peace and unity. However, the challenges of balancing collective identity with individual narratives remain a critical consideration in the ongoing process of reconciliation.

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8. Short biography

Rev. Jonas Musengimana is a dedicated pastor in the Presbyterian Church and a PhD student specializing in the history of Christianity. He serves as a lecturer of applied Christian ethics at the Protestant University of Rwanda. He holds a Master’s degree in Ethics and Leadership from the Protestant University of Rwanda, a Master’s degree in Public Health from Kampala University, and has completed a professional course in Improving Global Health Equity from Harvard University (online).

With a strong academic focus, Rev. Musengimana is researching John Calvin's leadership model and its historical contribution to church self-sufficiency, particularly in the context of the Presbyterian Church in Rwanda. His broader interests include Restorative justice, eco-theology, sustainable development, and the ethical implications of digitalization in education. Actively involved in community and academic discussions, he contributes to advancing theological reflections and practical applications in African societies

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