Genocide Commemoration in Rwanda through the Lens of Symbolic Reparation

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Keywords

Memorialization, Genocide Commemoration, Symbolic Reparation, Transitional Justice, Ethics, Liminality, Rwanda.

Abstract

This article examines genocide commemoration as symbolic reparation within Rwanda's transitional justice process. It portrays Rwanda as a society between the moral collapse of its violent past and the ongoing pursuit of a just and reconciled future. Based on qualitative desk research, the study argues that while formal justice cannot restore lost lives, commemoration creates a liminal space where acknowledgment, truth-telling, repentance, and memorialization advance a holistic, multidimensional reconciliation process, repairing interpersonal, spiritual, and ecological relationships.

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1. Introduction and Context

The Genocide perpetrated against the Tutsi in Rwanda claimed the lives of more than one million people in a brief period of 100 days, from April 7 to July 7, 1994 (Sasaki 2009; Wolfe, Kane, and Ansah 2022). This atrocity had profound and multifaceted consequences across the country's physical, psychological, moral, and social landscapes. Beyond the staggering loss of human life, survivors and the nation at large endured severe physical and psychological trauma, plunging Rwanda into a state of collective hopelessness and uncertainty about the future. The genocide shattered the social fabric, destroyed critical infrastructure, and inflicted lasting damage on the environment (Quigley and Hawdon 2018). The moral and spiritual wounds were deep, challenging individuals and communities to find pathways toward meaning, justice, and healing after such unprecedented horror (Longman 2017; King 2011; Nsengimana 2023).

Following the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi, Rwanda faced an unprecedented justice crisis, with over 1.4 million individuals registered as suspected perpetrators (National Service of Gacaca Courts 2012; Sasaki 2009). Conventional judicial systems would have required more than a century to process such a volume of cases (Wielenga & Harris 2011). In response, the Government of National Unity adopted a pragmatic and culturally rooted approach by revitalizing the traditional Gacaca courts (Sasaki 2009). This community-based justice mechanism was designed not only to ease the burden of overcrowded prisons and ensure legal accountability, but also to foster healing and restore relationships within fractured communities.

Described as a "homegrown solution," the Gacaca courts were developed to complement international justice mechanisms such as the United Nations-established International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR), which was responsible for prosecuting key figures behind the 1994 genocide (Gatwa and Mbonyintebe 2019). Although the ICTR made significant contributions to the advancement of international criminal law and the setting of important legal precedents, its geographic and procedural distance from Rwandan society limited its effectiveness in

promoting local reconciliation (Clark 2010). In contrast, Gacaca addressed justice at the grassroots level, emphasizing community participation, truth-telling, confession, accountability, restitution, and forgiveness (Clark 2010; Gatwa and Mbonyintebe 2019).

Alongside formal judicial mechanisms, memorialization has become a central component of Rwanda's transitional justice framework. By establishing genocide memorial sites, organizing annual commemoration events, and promoting educational programs, the Rwandan state fosters public acknowledgment of the genocide and ensures historical continuity through the preservation and integration of remembrance sites into national and international heritage (Rwanda Ministry of Education 2015; Rettig 2008). These memorial acts function as symbolic forms of reparation by helping individuals and communities process trauma, affirm collective and individual dignity, and reinforce a shared moral commitment to healing, reconciliation, and the prevention of future violence (Clark 2010; Ibreck 2010).

Most previous studies on reconciliation in post-genocide Rwanda have approached the topic from political, legal, sociological, and historical perspectives. These works have primarily focused on justice mechanisms, trauma healing, and the rebuilding of interpersonal and community relationships (Clark, 2010; Hintjens, 2008; Longman, 2011; Staub, 2011). While these perspectives have provided valuable insights into the institutional and psychological aspects of reconciliation, relatively little attention has been given to its symbolic dimension. This gap highlights the need for a deeper exploration of the cultural and symbolic practices that shape how Rwandans understand and experience reconciliation beyond legal and interpersonal frameworks.

This article examines how genocide commemoration operates as a moral and symbolic practice within Rwanda's transitional justice process following the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi. It focuses on how commemorative acts—such as the construction of memorials, annual remembrance ceremonies, public acknowledgments, and official declarations—promote key theological and ethical principles of reconciliation, including truth, justice, responsibility, accountability, acknowledgement, repentance, forgiveness, participation,

empathy, healing, and the restoration of broken relationships. These memorials practices honour the memory of the victims and create a liminal space for symbolic encounters between the visible and invisible worlds. In doing so, they acknowledge loss and reaffirm the moral order disrupted by mass violence (Smith 2018; Lee 2020). Within this context, symbolic reparation plays a vital role in restoring fractured interpersonal, spiritual and ecological relationships by affirming the dignity of survivors, recognizing collective suffering, and fostering a shared commitment to healing and non-repetition (Brown 2019; Martinez 2021; Patel 2018).

The article is structured into four main sections. Following the introduction, the second section focuses on the research design. The third section presents the analysis and interpretation of the data from a theological-ethical perspective. This section examines how genocide commemoration practices have contributed to advancing key theological and moral principles within the broader context of Rwanda's transitional justice processes. The final section offers a conclusion that summarizes the principal findings and reflects on how the analysis addresses the initial research question.

2. Research Design

The central research question guiding this analysis is as follows: How has genocide commemoration contributed to transitional justice and functioned as an instrument of symbolic reparation in post-genocide Rwanda? By addressing this question, the article seeks to deepen understanding of how symbolic, spiritual, and ethical dimensions of memory function not only as responses to historical violence but also as forward-looking rituals that sustain dignity, affirm shared humanity, and reconnect communities with a vision of collective hope (Hamber 2009; Lederach 1997; Rittner, Roth, and Whitworth 2004). The analysis emphasizes the interplay between official narratives and community meanings, highlighting how commemoration occupies a liminal space where past trauma, present responsibility, and future reconciliation are held together in theological and ethical convergences and tensions (Buckley-Zistel 2006; Uwineza and Pearson 2009).

This qualitative study draws on empirical data collected at Kirinda Parish of the Presbyterian Church in Rwanda between 2018 and 2023, as part of fieldwork conducted for the author's PhD thesis (Nsengimana 2023). While grounded in this fieldwork, the article is primarily desk-based, incorporating a wide range of sources, including genocide commemoration laws and regulations, official reports, online materials, and empirical secondary data from earlier publications. Thematic analysis was applied to systematically explore the data, enabling a nuanced understanding of recurrent themes, dominant concepts, and the deeper narratives embedded within the selected materials.

3. Data Analysis and Interpretation

This section is structured around six key points that explore the symbolic dimensions of memorialization in the aftermath of mass violence. The first point, *Symbolic Reparation of Relationships*, discusses how symbolic acts help mend broken interpersonal and inter-group bonds by affirming the dignity of survivors and fostering reconciliation. These restored relationships provide the moral ground upon which deeper processes of truth-telling and moral reckoning can emerge.

The second point, *Symbolism in Truth, Repentance, Justice, Forgiveness, and Reparation*, examines how these fundamental concepts carry deep symbolic weight, shaping collective narratives and moral frameworks necessary for social restoration. Yet, even as communities begin to articulate these values, individuals must still navigate the emotional burden of trauma embedded in personal and collective memory.

The third point, *Symbolic Processing of Hurt Memories*, focuses on how symbolic practices—such as rituals, storytelling, or memorials—aid individuals and communities in expressing and transforming traumatic memories. While these rituals help process trauma for the living, they also create a vital space for engaging with those who were lost. This leads to the fourth point, *A Space for Symbolic Encounter with the Living Dead*, which reflects on how symbolic spaces allow the living to acknowledge and commune with those who have died, helping to heal unresolved grief.

These encounters often take place within religious or spiritual frameworks, where the memory of the dead is linked to broader moral and metaphysical meanings.

The fifth point, *A Symbolic Encounter with God*, explores how faith-based symbols and rituals provide a spiritual dimension to healing, reaffirming moral order and divine justice. This spiritual anchoring also expands the scope of reconciliation beyond the human realm. Finally, the sixth point, *Symbolic Reconnection with the Non-Human Nature*, considers the cleansing and sanctification of physical spaces as a way to heal the moral and emotional wounds tied to sites of violence. Through these acts, the landscape itself becomes a witness and participant in the moral repair of society. Together, these six points show how symbolism functions as a powerful tool for individual and collective healing, moral renewal, and the reweaving of the social fabric in post-genocide Rwanda.

Symbolic Reparation of Relationships

In post-conflict societies, symbolic reparation plays a crucial role in rebuilding broken interpersonal and inter-group relationships. While material restitution is often difficult or impossible, especially in the aftermath of genocide, symbolic acts serve as powerful gestures of acknowledgement and reconciliation. In Rwanda, the annual genocide commemoration and the establishment of memorials are widely recognized as essential forms of symbolic reparation that affirm the dignity of survivors and promote social healing (Movsisyan 2017; Nsengimana 2023). As Govier (2006:179) explains, symbolic redress is "fundamentally a matter of expressing recognition that what was done was wrong and that it should not have happened."

At Kirinda Parish of the Presbyterian Church in Rwanda, empirical data reveal that the construction and maintenance of the local genocide memorial have become a central symbol of community-driven reconciliation. Built with contributions from parishioners, local Presbyterian institutions, and national church leadership, the memorial represents a collective acknowledgment of past wrongs. During the 2018

commemoration at Kirinda Parish, the Executive Secretary of Murambi Sector –a local government official– emphasized the importance of community involvement in the construction and maintenance of the local genocide memorial, describing it as a powerful act of symbolic reparation. He noted that the memorial site stands as a visible sign of positive change and renewed collective responsibility. Reflecting on the progress made, he stated: "As the time pass, the commemoration ritual is positively changing in terms of participation and improving genocide memorials" (Speech 2018).

This statement highlights that the memorial is not only a place of mourning but also a liminal space, in Victor Turner's (1969) sense of a threshold between separation and reintegration, where established social boundaries are temporarily dissolved and transformation becomes possible. Situated between the violence of the past and the hope of a reconciled future, the Rwandan genocide memorial functions as an in-between zone that allows for reflection, dialogue, and the gradual rebuilding of trust between former adversaries. Within this liminal context, the memorial facilitates a process akin to ritual transition. It provides a structured yet open space in which survivors, perpetrators, and communities can confront traumatic memory while envisioning new forms of coexistence (Douglas, 2001; Buckley-Zistel, 2006). Thus, the memorial operates not merely as a site of remembrance but as a ritual site of social and moral reconstruction, where the dignity of victims is reaffirmed, survivors are publicly supported, and the community collectively negotiates the passage from trauma to reconciliation.

This act of shared responsibility strengthens community bonds. As former Church President Elisée Musemakweli noted*:* "At the beginning, only genocide survivors were attending genocide commemoration rituals. But little by little, more people took part [...] and accepted to stand beside those who have suffered" (Speech 2018). According to Buckley and Björkdahl (2013), memorials offer survivors symbolic dignity, promote dialogue about the genocide, and help restore relationships. This was evident during the 2019 Kirinda commemoration, when a genocide survivor invited two perpetrators to a private meeting to offer forgiveness.

Their exchange, though emotionally difficult, illustrated the potential of symbolic acts to bridge even the deepest divides (Participant observation, 2019). Additionally, ritual elements such as candle lighting and laying flowers serve as acts of collective empathy. One speaker described the gesture of throwing flowers into the Nyabarongo River as "a sign of compassion for those who cannot bury theirs with dignity" (Speech 2018).

In each commemoration, the Master of Ceremonies reminds participants why the site holds particular significance. The Nyabarongo River, he explains, is regarded as a symbolic burial place for Tutsi victims who were thrown into its waters during the 1994 genocide. To honour their memory, participants perform a ritual act: they cast flowers into the river and place additional flowers at the nearby monument, which bears the names of those who perished in this way. In this sense, as de Greiff (2006: 453) affirms, symbolic reparation is "an expression of solidarity with victims" and a vital tool for healing a fractured society."

Another significant symbol used in genocide commemoration is the light of hope, expressed through the ritual of lighting candles, often referred to as the *inextinguishable flame*. Some respondents link this ritual to traditional Rwandan symbols of unity, particularly connecting the light of hope to the inextinguishable fire of Gihanga, the first mythical king of Rwanda. They note that "the fire symbolized the continuity and unity of the Rwandan people" (Interview, 2020). The ritual can thus be seen as a liminal practice, mediating between the darkness of the genocide's memory and the light of collective renewal. In Victor Turner's (1969) framework, liminality marks a threshold in which participants step outside ordinary social time into a symbolic space of transformation. The "inextinguishable light of Rwanda," expressed through words and song (Participant observation, 2018), encapsulates this transitional state, signifying both remembrance of loss and the potential for rebirth and unity emerging from shared suffering.

During such ceremonies, the community collectively inhabits this in-between moment, where grief and hope coexist, and where new social meanings are forged. In the Rwandan context, this ritualised illumination

functions as both symbolic reparation and a rite of passage (van Gennep, 1960), guiding the community from the memory of atrocity toward a reimagined moral order grounded in unity and resilience. Thus, the continuity represented by the flame reflects not permanence in a static sense, but an ongoing transitional process through which Rwandans continually renegotiate their collective identity in the aftermath of genocide (Hamber, 2009).

The symbolism of Gihanga's fire is also supported by historical accounts. Nsanzabera (2008: 48) describes the fire as having been maintained in a large clay pot using wood from erythrina trees. This fire, he notes, represented the sovereignty of the Rwandan kingdom and the lasting unity of its people. It reportedly burned continuously for more than 845 years, until it was extinguished by European colonisers in 1936 during the reign of King Mutara III Rudahigwa (Mbonimana 2008: 103).

Truth, Repentance, Justice, Forgiveness. and Reparation

In post-genocide Rwanda, especially in the Kirinda community, truth, repentance, justice, forgiveness, and reparation function not only as legal or institutional mechanisms but also as powerful symbols that shape collective memory and moral reconstruction. These interwoven concepts embody tensions and contradictions, yet they remain indispensable to the restoration of broken relationships and the pursuit of social healing. In fact, Symbolic reparation does not only include visible elements like genocide memorials and commemorations, but also intangible components such as confession, public apology, truth-telling, and justice. As Sasaki and Muvunyi (2012:146) argue, symbolic reparation must extend beyond monuments to include "individual and collective apologies, efforts to uncover the truth and justice to make offenders accountable."

In Kirinda, commemorative practices reflect this symbolic function, particularly through public prayers of repentance and official messages by church authorities. These gestures, while meaningful, remain limited in their impact when not accompanied by deeper truth-telling and genuine

contrition. Empirical data from Kirinda show that individual confession is rare. Most public narratives are rehearsals of known cases, rather than fresh admissions of guilt or revelations of victims' bodies. A genocide survivor at Kirinda lamented during a commemorative event: "We hear stories about people already judged, but we want to know where the bodies of our loved ones are. Without that, we cannot bury them with dignity" (Speech 2018). This absence of full disclosure undermines reconciliation, as survivors continue to live with unanswered questions and unresolved grief.

Jesee (2017:14) confirms that the discovery and proper burial of victims are crucial to reconciliation: "Without truth on the location of bodies, survivors are unable to envision a peaceful future of interethnic relationships." However, perpetrators often withhold information due to fear of legal repercussions, given the severity of punishment for genocide crimes in Rwanda (Testimonials, 2019). Schreiter (2018: 19) underscores the importance of truth-telling in overcoming a culture of silence: "Situations that call for reconciliation often become saturated with lies… breaking through this silence is a key part of reconciliation."

Yet, as Kabwete suggests, truth is rarely objective; it is "a negotiated knowledge," shaped by both facts and interpretations (Kabwete 2018:65). Confessions are often influenced by legal incentives or social pressure rather than moral clarity. In some cases, perpetrators provide distorted or incomplete accounts to minimize their responsibility (Kabwete 2018:75). Ordinary conflicts—such as land disputes or intra-community rivalries unrelated to the genocide—have further complicated the search for truth. One genocide convict from Kirinda explained: "We no longer have problems with genocide survivors, but with our fellow family members … They fabricated charges against me for their own benefit" (Kirinda Interview, 2019).

In such a context, justice is deeply contested. While survivors often demand retributive justice as a form of recognition and moral redress, others emphasize restorative justice to enable societal healing. According to Johnson (2012: 42), "Most victims will feel a strong desire for

recognition that the perpetrator is indeed guilty… most will want that recognition to be accompanied by some form of punishment." However, Mugabe (2018: 138) calls attention to the importance of symbolic justice even for those wrongly accused, arguing that "immaterial means of reparation are similarly important to all kinds of victims."

Forgiveness, likewise, is fraught with tension. Minow (1998:17) warns against "hollow forgiveness," which may be socially expected but not sincerely felt. Yet some survivors in Kirinda have chosen to forgive unconditionally, grounded in religious conviction. One survivor told perpetrators during a private dialogue: "I forgive because I am a Christian. But I still want to know why you did what you did" (Participant observation 2019). Schreiter (2018: 15-16) affirms that forgiveness can be offered even in the absence of an apology, as "a gift of grace" that liberates both parties.

Katongole (2011:76) prioritizes the "justice of love" over the "love of justice," framing forgiveness as a sacrificial act that mirrors divine reconciliation through Christ. This perspective underscores that reconciliation entails transformation—not a return to the past, but movement toward a new, grace-filled future. In this light, Schreiter (2018:17) observes that reconciliation makes both victim and wrongdoer a "new creation," yet he cautions that the process is rarely linear: it involves "much frustration, seeming roadblocks, and doubling back" (Schreiter 2018:18). In Kirinda, as elsewhere in post-genocide Rwanda, these symbolic practices, though fraught with ambiguity and tension, are vital for envisioning and constructing a shared moral and social future.

Symbolic Processing of Hurt Memories

The commemoration of the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi offers a profound space for individuals and communities to access, express, and process trauma through symbolic and ritual acts. At Kirinda Parish, commemorative practices such as liturgical prayers, silent marches, testimonial sessions, poetry, and flower offerings provide a safe environment for survivors to externalize grief, fear, and sorrow. These non-verbal and verbal forms of expression reflect deep psychological

needs and spiritual mourning. As reported during the 2018 commemoration, one song accompanied by a flower offering included the words: "But us, we visit you at this genocide memorial with these flowers and sorrow. We are really deeply affected," symbolizing continued pain and enduring solidarity with the dead (Participant observation 2018). This aligns with Staub's [et al.] (2005:305) finding that healing occurs through "sharing painful experiences in an empathic context."

In the same way, Colours such as purple—imported colour from Christian missionaries—black and grey, frequently used during commemorations, carry profound symbolic meanings rooted in both national memory and Rwandan cultural understandings of mourning. They have become emblematic of the genocide, signifying trauma, loss, and remembrance. Particularly, white adds a contrasting dimension. While generally associated with peace and purity, it can represent the innocence of the victims and the hope for reconciliation and spiritual renewal (Nsengimana 2023).

The deliberate use of these colours creates a visual language of grief and remembrance, enabling participants to engage emotionally with the past in ways that transcend verbal articulation. As one survivor stated, "When I see these colours, it's like they speak what I feel but cannot say" (Interview 2018). From the perspective of designation (official design and meanings) and appropriation (community meanings), grey has been recognized as the official colour of genocide commemoration by the Government of Rwanda. However, in practice, communities continue to use other colours that reflect the emotional meanings they personally associate with mourning and remembrance (Nsengimana 2023).

On the other hand, symbolic action like silent meditations, walking in silence, lighting candles, or bowing before mass graves symbolize the emotional burdens that are difficult to express. These embodied acts confirm Ford's assertion that rituals "contain and transform emotions too overwhelming to articulate" (Ford 2018), offering a sacred space where grief can be expressed, witnessed, and slowly integrated. Together, these

ritual elements compose a symbolic and therapeutic language of mourning that enables survivors to begin the nonlinear journey of healing.

To sum up, empirical findings from Kirinda demonstrate that genocide commemoration is a powerful tool for trauma processing and collective healing. Yet, they also carry potential risks of re-traumatization of genocide survivors and shame on perpetrators. A careful balance between remembrance, truth-telling, and compassion is essential to ensure that commemorative practices contribute meaningfully to individual recovery and social reconciliation.

A Space for Symbolic Encounter with the Living Dead

Empirical findings from this study reveal that in many African cosmologies, including that of Rwanda, the living dead—those who have died but remain spiritually present—are understood as active agents in the lives of the living. They are believed to hear, receive offerings, intervene in the affairs of their descendants, and mediate between humans and the divine (Mbiti 1990:89–106; Gyekye 1997: 161). Consequently, the commemoration of the genocide is not simply a civic ritual but also a symbolic encounter between the living and the dead. Through objects, words, gestures, and songs, the living attempt to restore a broken relationship with those who passed away, especially those who were denied a dignified burial or farewell.

This symbolic interaction takes several forms. First is the accomplishment of missed funeral rituals, often necessitated by the violent and chaotic circumstances in which many genocide victims died. Examples include lighting the mourning fire—a traditional practice intended to appease restless spirits—and the reburial of victims' bodies with due honour when they are recovered (Nsengimana 2023). Second, offerings are made, both tangible (such as flowers) and intangible (like songs, prayers, or body gestures) that express remorse, remembrance, or love. Third, the act of naming the dead, recounting their virtues, or testifying to their past accomplishments publicly reinstates their dignity and restores their

memory and keep their presence in the community (Nshimiyimana 2018: 102).

In African thought, disruption in the proper treatment of the dead—whether through improper burial, neglect, or unresolved injustice—can result in misfortunes like illness, death, or general family strife (Mbiti 1990: 83). Gyekye (1997: 161) underscores that the behaviour and attitude of the living toward the dead determine how the dead return, either as peaceful protectors or as vengeful spirits. The status of an ancestor, moreover, is not accorded to all the dead. Only those who have lived virtuous lives, died "good deaths," and received proper burial rites may enter the realm of ancestors and maintain peaceful relationships with the living (Awolalu and Dopamu 1979: 174). Ultimately, in many African worldviews, naming the departed and recounting their accomplishments allows them to continue living as members of the family, even after death. A person who dies without anyone to remember or speak their name is considered to cease to exist entirely. While Christian theology often holds that life after death is guaranteed through resurrection, African traditions assert that without remembrance, there is no after-death existence (Mbiti 1990; Gyekye 1996; Nsengimana 2023).

Thus, funeral and commemorative rituals serve a deeply theological and anthropological purpose: they ensure a smooth transition of the deceased into the world of ancestors and prevent them from becoming tormented or tormenting spirits. Contrary to popular assumptions, ancestors are not worshipped in African religions; they are revered, honoured for their influence and remembered through relational acts and offerings. As Gyekye (1996:163) clarifies, this reverence is a social behaviour, an expression of familial obligation and cultural continuity. It is veneration, not worship.

During genocide commemoration, these symbolic encounters manifest powerfully. At Kirinda Parish, for example, people are seen bowing before memorial walls, observing moments of silence, and laying wreaths, acts that signify reverence and remembrance. Offerings such as songs and flowers also serve to re-establish emotional and spiritual ties.

During the 2018 commemoration at Kirinda, an artist performed a touching song addressed to deceased parents: "When others visit their parents, they bring gifts—costumes, women's fabrics, provisions—to make them happy. But us, we visit you at this genocide memorial with these flowers and sorrow. We are really deeply affected." (Participant observation 2018).

In another song, the artist describes a survivor who writes a letter hidden in a flower and brings it to his deceased brother, confident that the latter can hear and feel his presence. The song acknowledges not only the sorrow and personal connection between siblings but also the communal solidarity in grief:

> "This wreath I am presenting to you is a gift I brought for you, my brother. In this memorial site, I will keep on visiting you. All these people you see; they came to help me commemorate you… We are all here to commemorate you and restore your dignity. (Participant observation 2018).

These rituals are most effective within ecclesial spaces, which serve as extended families capable of holding both pain and forgiveness. Ultimately, commemoration becomes not just remembrance, but a sacred space for healing, reconciliation, and restored unity between the living and the dead.

A Symbolic Encounter with God

Empirical data from genocide commemoration practices at Kirinda Parish provide rich insights into how reconciliation with God is experienced as a communal and spiritual process deeply embedded in collective acknowledgment of sin and the pursuit of healing. During commemorative liturgies, repentance is articulated through formal prayers led by church ministers who voice collective confession on behalf of the entire community. One poignant example from the 2018 commemoration reads: "God our Lord, in the name of Jesus Christ our saviour, you gave a beautiful country to Rwandans. We are in your presence with sorrow because we did not consider your legacy of unity"

(Participant observation 2018). This prayer explicitly acknowledges the failure to uphold God's commandments, identifying sins such as ethnic discrimination, cursing, vengeful attitudes, and even the Church's complicity in silence and inaction during the genocide.

This collective confession culminates in a powerful expression of shame and repentance, as the minister continues: "we are ashamed and regretting because of our sins, we could not be allowed to open our mouths in your presence, but because of the blood of Jesus Christ who has reconciled us to you, we dare to come to you" (Participant observation 2018). This theological framing resonates with the wider Christian understanding of sin as a cosmic disorder that fractures creation itself, echoing Tveit's (2013) description of the whole creation "groaning" for reconciliation. It also mirrors African cosmologies in which sin is seen as a rupture in communal harmony, affecting not only individuals but the entire community, including ancestors and spiritual forces (Kasomo 2010).

Interview data collected at Kirinda reflect how this liturgical repentance is perceived by participants as essential for restoring relationships. Many survivors and community members expressed that acknowledging collective sin during these rituals opens a pathway toward healing and peace. The ritual invocation of Christ's blood is particularly significant; it symbolizes spiritual purification and cleansing, enabling the community to seek forgiveness and re-establish unity. Respondents described moments of relief and hope during these prayers, underscoring their transformative power. One participant noted, "When we say this prayer together, it feels like a heavy burden is lifted. It is as if we are being made whole again" (Interview, 2018).

While collective repentance is central to communal healing in places like Kirinda Parish, it must not overshadow or exclude the need for individual repentance. Collective acts—such as community confessions, liturgical prayers, and public rituals—acknowledge shared moral failure and the community's complicity or silence during the genocide, echoing Gatwa's (2005) notion of "standing in the breach". However, when individual repentance is neglected in favour of abstract collective confession, there is a

risk of diffused accountability that can frustrate victims and hinder trust-building (Schreiter 2018). Conversely, when individual repentance is supported and contextualized within communal practices of reconciliation, the process becomes more credible, transformative, and sustainable. As Nolte-Schamm (2006) argues, authentic repentance opens space for new beginnings grounded in ethical transformation. Thus, individual and collective accountability are not opposing forces but mutually reinforcing elements of a deeper moral and spiritual restoration.

Symbolic Reconnection with the Non-Human Nature

Empirical data from post-genocide Rwanda reveal that survivors often avoid spaces and objects associated with past violence, initially perceiving them as hostile and dangerous. For example, one survivor interviewed in 2019 had avoided commemorations at Kirinda due to traumatic memories of physical and psychological violence experienced there during the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi. However, by transforming former killing sites into commemorative venues, survivors assign new meanings to these spaces, turning them into intimate places of memory and encounter between the living and the dead (Nsengimana 2023).

For instance, at the Nyabarongo River commemoration, the Master of Ceremonies emphasizes the river as a symbolic cemetery holding loved ones, reflecting Schirch's (2005) insight that ritual spaces connect people with each other and their environment. From an African perspective, purification rituals are essential to cleanse persons, places, and objects tainted by bloodshed. Traditionally, purification involves the sprinkling of lustral water—a mixture of water, kaolin clay, and sacred grasses—intended to ward off misfortunes such as illness, sterility, or premature death (Van 't Spijker 1990). In this context, commemorations at Kirinda conclude with blessings and ritual handwashing, symbolically "washing death away" to purify both participants and the environment, thereby reinforcing communal harmony (Nsengimana 2023).

Ilo (2009) argues that African theology views reconciliation as restoring harmony not only among humans but with the entire cosmos, including

non-human nature. Bloodshed disrupts this harmony, causing decay and death, while reconciliation fosters fertility and new life. African cultures often protect certain animals and trees through taboos, emphasizing the sacredness of all life and the interconnectedness of humans, nature, ancestors, and God (Mbiti 1990; Kagame 1956). This ecological ethic reflects a worldview in which the environment is not merely a backdrop for human life but an active participant in spiritual and communal well-being. Consequently, an African theology of reconciliation integrates the whole of creation, affirming life as a participated existence that involves community, land, and the divine (Bujo 2001; Magesa 1997).

4. Conclusion

This article explored how genocide commemoration supports transitional justice, national healing, and the symbolic restoration of relationships. It highlights commemoration as a crucial ritual space for publicly acknowledging suffering and preserving collective memory. Through symbolic acts that affirm survivors' dignity, fractured interpersonal and inter-group bonds are repaired, fostering reconciliation. Practices like truth-telling, repentance, and participatory memorialization help communities and individuals work through painful memories, promoting both personal and social healing. Ultimately, commemoration creates a liminal space that enables multidimensional reconnections at personal, communal, spiritual, and ecological levels.

In post-genocide Rwanda, the symbolic dimensions of truth, repentance, justice, forgiveness, and reparation are central to moral reconstruction and social healing. These elements are deeply interconnected yet often marked by tension and ambiguity. Truth-telling, for example, carries profound symbolic weight but remains elusive, especially when victims' bodies are undiscovered, leaving survivors with unresolved grief. Repentance and public apology, often expressed through religious rituals, signal moral transformation but are constrained by fear of legal consequences and social pressures. Justice is contested, as some demand retribution as moral recognition, while others emphasize restorative

justice for communal healing. Forgiveness, symbolically powerful, may liberate both victim and perpetrator, yet risks becoming performative if insincere. Despite these tensions, symbolic acts remain vital for envisioning reconciliation and rebuilding fractured relationships in post-conflict Rwanda.

In addition, commemorative rituals offer survivors symbolic tools to process trauma, reconnect with the dead, and seek spiritual and social reconciliation. Through silent marches, testimonies, prayers, music, color symbolism, and flower offerings, survivors externalize grief in culturally resonant ways. These rituals function as a "symbolic language of mourning," expressing emotions too overwhelming for words. Colors like gray, black, and white embody cultural meanings of loss and dignity. Acts like wreath-laying or testimonial speech restore fractured bonds between the living and the dead, reinforcing African cosmologies where the "living dead" remain spiritually present. Such practices also provide a sacred space to engage with God, creation, and community, blending African and Christian frameworks for healing, memory, and justice.

By situating commemorative practice within both African cosmological and Christian theological perspectives, the article underscores the sacred significance of remembering. Ritualized mourning, spiritual reparation, and symbolic gestures extend justice beyond institutional mechanisms, offering a moral grammar through which broken relationships—among humans, the divine, and the environment—can be gradually restored. These findings challenge narrow legal frameworks by emphasizing the depth of symbolic language in post-conflict recovery. Commemoration, therefore, becomes not merely retrospective but transformative, enabling societies to reimagine the future through a shared acknowledgment of pain and the hopeful pursuit of restored dignity.

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