

Mourning and Recovery From Trauma: In Rwanda, Tears Flow Within

DÉOGRATIAS BAGILISHYA
Montreal Children's Hospital

Abstract This article is a personal testimony of the great suffering experienced by thousands of Rwandan parents on learning of the killing of their children in the 1994 Rwandan genocide. In the face of the unprecedented social cataclysm that led my eldest son to his death, my intent is to demonstrate the necessity of resituating ideas about grief and trauma in a framework that is coherent with Rwandan culture. This is essential if one wishes to help Rwandans find words for their fears, hopes and questions about the loss of loved ones in the context of extreme violence. By discussing the intervention offered by my mother, I address the approach used in Rwandan tradition as a response to and therapeutic tool for extreme grief and trauma.

Key words culture • grief • intervention • prevention • Rwanda • therapy • trauma

AN EXPERIENCE OF SUFFERING AT THE LIMITS OF ENDURANCE

The tears of a man flow within.

The sorrow of a cooking pot is understood by he who has scraped its bottom.
(Rwandan proverbs)

The two Rwandan proverbs given above symbolize the intense suffering I experienced upon learning of the death of my eldest son at the hands of a

Tutsi soldier, a member of the army that seized power after the genocide and trauma of 1994. Of Hutu origin, I arrived in Rwanda in August 1995 determined to find Yves, my eldest son, who had been missing for a year. I was living in Canada at the time of the genocide and collective massacres of 1994. Those who murdered my 21-year-old son circulated the rumor that he had been enlisted in the 'New Army' and had been assigned a mission which demanded utmost secrecy, particularly as to his whereabouts.

Barely a week after my arrival in Rwanda, I was speaking with my mother at our family home, when a young Tutsi soldier my son's age came to welcome me. After going through the ritual of greetings so basic to the Rwandan people, and some twenty minutes of small talk, the young man asked if we might speak in private, under the pretext of discussing some confidential questions about Canada. I asked him to join me at one end of the enclosure surrounding the house, where we would be safe from prying eyes, and we had the following discussion:

Soldier: I should not be telling you this, but people are quite upset that you are investigating your son's whereabouts.

DB: What's all this? What are you saying?

Soldier: Your son is a hero . . . he successfully completed his mission and no one need worry about him any longer . . . I was there when it happened . . . it was one of our soldiers who killed him . . . I . . . I must go now. . . Please don't tell anyone what I have just told you. . . You must leave. Return to where you came from before certain people realize that you know what has happened. You must believe me.

Words cannot express how I felt to have before me someone who had witnessed the murder of my son. After this revelation, a flood of terrifying scenarios filled my head. I felt as though I was the lead actor in a horror film in which I helplessly watched as thousands of babies, children, persons of all ages, were put to death without mercy in a genocide that they had neither provoked nor encouraged. I imagined them dying of cold, fatigue, hunger and thirst, from all sorts of diseases, or the inconceivable tortures and other inhumane and degrading acts inflicted upon them without pity by sadistic executioners.

The paralyzing revelation of the death of my son transformed my inner world into an ocean of tears and sadness, buffeted by a storm of anger that laid the foundation for thoughts of bloody vengeance. Unceasingly, my inner voice was telling me it was my right and my duty as a father to avenge my son – that one death demands another. I felt shame and guilt for these violent impulses that flooded my mind. I was frightened by the disagreeable feeling of hatred that filled my being but was incapable of distancing

myself from this overwhelming hatred that demanded action. I literally wanted to kill the young Tutsi who told me of the death of my son, even though he had been a powerless witness. Fueled by the rage I suffered upon hearing of my son's assassination, I wanted to lash out, not only against his killers, but against my entire country. I detested Rwanda (both the Hutu and the Tutsi), a country that had become the most severe violator of human rights. I wanted to exact revenge upon the entire nation where the right to live belonged only to the well-armed, where the death of a human being was considered commonplace, where the concepts of genocide and group massacres of the innocent had become part of the landscape. Even in my rage, I was overwhelmed with grief at the thought of the social violence in Rwanda, a violence which had proven fatal to my son.

I found it difficult to believe that there had once been a time in Rwanda when someone's death required neighbours to cease all activities out of respect for the dead and in support of the family that had suffered the loss, where it was believed that violating this tradition of honoring the dead and helping the stricken family carried an extreme penalty.

I felt invaded by a profound sense of emptiness as I reminisced that since 1994, the bodies of many of the victims (including my son Yves) remain unburied and have not been laid to rest in the manner of their parents. Some of the skeletal remains of victims of the 1994 tragedy have been put on display for visiting dignitaries, although the families of these victims would likely have wished otherwise.

I felt powerless and could not see a future for us as Rwandans, given this victory of inexplicable evil, this fraternal hatred that brought about the deaths of hundreds of thousands of innocents. I often think of a childhood friend who told me a story about a man who suffered his entire life and who, before dying, said to God, 'If you exist, I forgive you.' I found it difficult to understand the designs of this all-powerful God who remained silent while thousands of innocent people were being massacred in the very churches and temples built in His honour.

After learning of the tragic death of my son, a minute of deathly silence passed between the young soldier and me. This silence was so intense that my mother, who had been discretely hanging back, decided to approach us slowly, bringing her hands to her breasts. After a few moments, my mother turned to the young officer and said, 'don't forget that you are now a man, and that the tears of a man flow within' (*les larmes coulent dans le ventre* – lit. 'tears flow in the belly').

I was stunned because, mired in my own suffering, I had not noticed that the young man was also having a powerful emotional reaction (tears fell from his eyes, his body shook). My visitor wept in silence, almost paralyzed by the flood of tears pouring from him. The tension was again interrupted by my mother who, while untying a knot in her belt, spoke softly, as if to

herself, '*Uganya inkanda ni uba agisohoka*' (he who still has some rags with which to hide his nudity can leave the house and let his needs be known; but he who is truly naked remains alone in his house where no one can help him' or 'the greatest suffering is done in silence').

After citing this proverb my mother turned toward each of us, one at a time, while touching one of the knots in her belt before once again leaving us alone. The discussion below transpired a few minutes after her departure:

Young man: Father . . . may I call you father?

(I responded by offering him a glass of beer and proposing a toast to the health of our loved ones.)

Young man: I am the son of X, from Y. You went to school with my father. I found a photo of the two of you together at your graduation, you must have been friends.

DB: How is your father? What has he done with his life? Has he managed to escape the demons that have been unleashed upon us?

Young man: He is dead. I am the only survivor in my family. The killers murdered everyone, piled their bodies in the living room of our home and set fire to everything. My family was lucky, at least they were not devoured by dogs like so many other corpses abandoned in the woods . . .

DB: I am sorry . . .

After I told him I was sorry for what he had suffered, the young man began to recount in detail all that he had seen, heard and experienced. He spoke of the massacres of April 1994 as though they had taken place yesterday, the words of hatred that had summoned the genocide, the roadblocks where thousands were massacred, the witchhunts set up to find the survivors of the collective massacres, the women raped and disemboweled. He spoke of the cruelty of the murderers but also of the heroic people who had refused to take part and instead had put their own lives in danger in an attempt to save or protect those who had received a death sentence regardless of their ethnic origin. The young man's emotions, feelings and spirit echoed my own thoughts about the genocide and collective massacres of 1994.

I did not talk of my own suffering, as though I felt the need to understand it and communicate it through this young military officer who presented a reflection of my own distress. I felt it was important to establish a link with this young man who was of the same generation as my dead son and to grant him time to express his suffering and share his pain (as I no doubt would have done for my son, now gone).

At the beginning, I felt as though I was unconsciously playing the role of therapist, helping a child in distress to confront his difficulties, an intervention geared toward encouraging the expression of emotions experienced. However, after a time, I felt the need to communicate my own suffering to the young man, despite our difference in age (a Rwandan adult is never to expose his feelings or emotions to one who could be the age of his children). I began to speak of my own painful memories of the genocide and collective massacres of 1994. I recalled the chaos – the loss of both internal and external points of reference – that had caused the indescribable and irreparable hurt which had culminated in the death of my son, as well as many members of my family and countless friends, each under hideous circumstances.

After many hours confronting and sharing our feelings about what we had experienced, I ended the meeting with my young guest by citing the following Rwandan proverb: *Akamarantimba kava mu muntu*, which means ‘the greatest sorrow comes from within’ to signify that our ability to survive unusually difficult situations is determined by our inner strength. Without a moment’s hesitation, he responded with another Rwandan proverb, *Agahinda kinkono kamenywa n’uwayiharuye*, which can be translated to mean ‘the sorrow of a cooking pot is understood by he who has scraped its bottom,’ signifying that one can only help someone else by genuinely listening to his suffering.

This intense experience of confronting and sharing the suffering of the emissary of my son’s assassin lasted about two and a half hours. In the moment, I had not realized that our meeting had been punctuated with traditional forms of expression (proverbs and nonverbal gestures like touching one’s breast or loosening the knots of one’s belt) used by my mother as external reinforcement for the emotions, thoughts and spirit conveyed by the young officer and myself. The use of these cultural tools gave meaning to our rage and sadness – and prevented behaviors akin to those of which we had spoken.

THE ROLE OF PROVERBS IN REPRESENTING DISTRESS AND PREVENTING ACTS OF ANGER

Rwandan tradition provides a set of popular beliefs and practices to which the people of Rwanda often turn in difficult situations and times of great distress. The use of proverbs is one strategy frequently used in Rwandan tradition to symbolize intense distress, and introduce a distance between experience and action, both at the social level and at the level of cognition.

‘Proverb’ is translated in Kinyarwanda (a language common to all Rwandans) by the term *umugani*. The radical *gan* is found in certain verbs: *ku-gan-ira* (to cause), *ku-gan-iriza* (to cause to happen), *ku-gan-irira* (to

cause for specific ends). The underlying idea is of conversation or dialogue. In the vernacular, the term *umugani* has two meanings. In the first place it signifies a saying, proverb, sentence or maxim; a second sense signifies tale, legend, myth, story, fable or parable.

In Rwandan tradition, the proverb is a mode of communication often used to express what a person has seen, heard and experienced at the level of emotions, feelings and states of mind, as well as to indicate to someone that they have been understood. The following story shows how a proverb can be used to solve a dilemma:

Before dying, a father wanted to reassure himself that his only son had true friends. He lent him the use of a cow to give to the best among them. The son hesitated for a moment – one had chosen him as his best friend, but it was the other he most cherished. He pointed out the latter to his father who proposed a way to test the friendship. The boy, covered in blood, was to seek refuge for the night with each of them, confessing he had been accused of murder and was being pursued. The friend he preferred refused to compromise his own safety. However, the boy who had chosen the son as his best friend (the first) took up arms and said: ‘Come, let us escape, I will save you.’ The father concluded with this proverb: ‘*Gukunda ikitagukunda ni imvura igwa mwi ishyamba*,’ which can be translated to mean ‘loving someone who does not love you in return is worth no more than a rain shower in the forest’ or ‘don’t let yourself be swept away by anyone: love those who love you! As for the one you love, he no doubt loves another!’

In Rwandan tradition, the proverb is often an appeal to the capacity of each person to give responses or explications through a mode of expression used to recognize, confirm and participate in what the other is living on an emotional level. The proverb creates a bridge between emotions, feelings or states of mind suffered at difficult moments, and the appropriate attitude prescribed by Rwandan tradition, to surmount the difficulties caused by this trying situation. As such, the gestures made by my mother (touching her chest, loosening the knots in her belt) before reciting each proverb were charged with meaning and well conveyed the role of the proverb to make a bridge between the emotions suffered and the behavior adapted to the danger in progress. The proverb ‘the tears that flow within’ had no other goal than to break the deadly silence between the young military officer and me by creating a bridge between his sorrow (the ‘flood of tears’ that flowed down his cheeks) and my own (my ‘flood of tears’ at the point of overflowing). My mother’s resort to proverbs was effective in that it improved my psychological state as well as that of my guest, as evidenced by a decrease in our tension and anxiety. It also allowed us to re-establish communication, to express what each of us had seen, heard, and above all, experienced at the level of feelings and emotions. The knowledge that we had shared a similar experience was calming and

reassuring, and allowed us to freely express our emotions, feelings and states of mind.

No one can anticipate the emotional upheaval that follows a major loss like the death of one's child. The discovery of my son's murder had been so emotionally devastating that I had not been conscious of the degree to which both the verbal and non-verbal interactions accompanying this news had contained the essence of the popular beliefs and practices associated with mourning and recovery from trauma in Rwandan tradition.

MOURNING IN TRADITIONAL RWANDAN CULTURE

In Rwanda, death is well understood as part of life, and a natural and timely death does not generate great psychological distress. The inevitability of death is a law of nature associated with the will of *Imana* or God, and nothing more. Many Rwandan proverbs demonstrate this acceptance of death: *lyakaremye niyo lkamena* ('He who creates the vase is also the one that breaks it'), *Ntawe upfa adatanzwe n'Imana* ('Only God has the power to decide when we will die'), *Nyamunsi ntitsindwa* ('The master of time is never defeated'), *Tugomba kwitaba iyo Imana iduhamagaye* ('One must answer God's call, whatever the cost').

A Rwandan's first concern is not to ensure a burial with great solemnity, but to have a family member help him in the great journey he must one day make to answer God's call. In Rwandan tradition two formulaic expressions are invariably used to announce a death: (i) *Yatashye*, which can be translated as 'he has come home'; and (ii) *Yatabaye*, translated as 'He has gone as a hero to bring help.'

The second expression is used especially to announce the death of a close relative. The phrase 'your son is a hero . . .' was the most appropriate expression, in Rwandan tradition, not only to inform me of the terrible news of my son's death, but in particular to symbolize the beginning of an intense new life for my dead son, full of meaning. In Rwandan tradition, the worst of losses does not signify that life is over. Instead, death leads to a rebirth, a new life in the world of the ancestors, the invisible heroes who play the role of liberators and intermediaries between *Imana* (God) and their family in the world of the living. The mourning process and the working through of trauma associated with the death of a family member follow the significance of this form of rebirth through actions that symbolize the persistence and permanence of the identity of the person who exchanges his home and country for the invisible world of the ancestral protectors.

In Rwandan thought, the departed in the invisible world of the ancestors do not assume the same form as they had in the visible world. Instead, the deceased grow larger than life to be re-made as heroes, called *Umutabazi*

(from the verb *gutabara* that signifies coming to someone's aid). Death, therefore, is a transformation that takes the deceased relative from his perishable state to the imperishable status of ancestral protector, that is to say, a hero who will liberate his brothers from all that enslaves or plagues them, a saviour who turns curses into blessings.

The care given to the mortal remains of a relative and the compassion directed toward him during the period of mourning are not only proof of filial piety for the deceased, and of brotherhood and hospitality to the living, but equally a concrete expression of the rebirth that follows death. The relative who prepares himself to join his ancestors as a hero is usually assisted by his close relatives. It is no coincidence that the status that Rwandans traditionally give to the body before burial is similar to that of the fetus in the mother's womb. To this end, before the relative has taken his last breath, a member of the family brings his knees to his chin and bends his elbows so that the hands cover the face. This service offered to the dead is called *gupfunya umupfu nkigitebo*, which can be translated as 'lending to death the form of a basket' (a metaphor which conjures the image of a full-term pregnancy). After this ritual, called *guptunya*, the members of the family take care to give the deceased relative the tools necessary for his voyage and to take up residence in the world of the ancestral protectors. In the right hand, one places a few grains of sorghum and the seeds from a gourd, as well as some traditional lettuce leaves, called *isogi*, for nourishment, some hairs plucked from a sheep's skin for clothing, and a few plants with magical properties, particularly the stem of a plant called *unwishywa*, to open up a pathway through the dark passages of the invisible world.

This ritual is followed by farewell speeches that translate the feelings at the root of these attentive gestures. The forms of farewell used in this ritual of separation are the following: 'return to us softly like the lamb whose fleece you carry with you;' and 'return to us without thorns like the stem that adorns your hand.' During this ritual of separation, Rwandans express their hope to see the deceased relative again, but happy and at peace, and promise him a warm welcome whenever he visits the family home. After the ritual of separation, a member of the family who assisted the dying relative during his final moments speaks the following words dedicated to a loved one: 'He has gone to bring help,' announcing his death.

The death of a loved one is followed by an eight-day period characterized by: (i) the work of mourning, which protects the living against the violence of the impact of the loss they have suffered; and (ii) a renewed enthusiasm, born of the joy inspired by the long voyage which takes a loved one from the throes of death to the world of mythic heroes that the Rwandan people reserve for these generous liberators, from which they invoke continued protection with hymns and offerings.

The process of mourning begins with the funeral, which generally takes place a few hours following the death. Sometimes there may be a delay due to the circumstances surrounding the death or the distance that must be traveled by some members of the family, but this delay rarely lasts longer than 24 hours. For eight days, neighbours, friends and family remain gathered around the body at all times. Others bring food and drink to relieve the pressure on those in mourning. During the eight days following a major loss, the person who suffers this loss is not required to make decisions and is given special care and attention. It is a period in which all activity is discontinued due to the emotional shock or numbness experienced by the loss of a loved one.

In Rwandan tradition, the work of mourning undertaken by the living evokes the image of a short stopover that the dead relative makes at a quiet airport before taking the long voyage from the throes of death to rebirth as a new being, called *umukurambere* or 'ancestral protector,' in the invisible world (the world without light or the world of extinguished fire). In Kinyarwanda, the work of mourning is called *kwirabura* which can be translated as 'being black' or 'being in darkness.' The term *kwirabura* makes reference to an absence of light (whiteness) from sun or fire, caused by the cessation of all human activity. In Rwandan tradition, fire symbolizes life (the same word *ubuzima* also signifies 'health' and 'extinguished flame'). This term *ubuzima* is derived from the verb *kuzima* which may be translated as 'to die out.' The substitution of the last vowel 'a' for a 'u' alters the word to *kuzimu*, which means 'below, in the gloom' to signify the residence of the dead. The host of this residence is called *umuzimu* (*abazimu* in the plural), a term which evokes the surviving personality of the deceased. One must simply change the final vowel 'u' for 'a' to transform the word into *umuzima* (*abazima* in the plural) which signifies living and healthy. In the language of Rwandans, the passage from the world of the living (the world of light or where fire is never extinguished) assumes the characteristic of a transformation of meaning that brings the Rwandan from his state as a living person prior to death to the personality of the deceased which does not perish with death.

The change in status and residence of a deceased relative is characterized by a period of emotional shock that requires the work of mourning by the living who have suffered the loss of the loved one. The period of mourning seems to be a privileged moment to liberate strong aggressive urges ('death drive') projected upon the death and/or the deceased relative. It is for this reason that any food found in the house at the moment of death must be thrown away. Guns and tools belonging to the deceased must be cleansed in purifying waters. Other popular beliefs and practices during the period of mourning concern getting rid of everything that could be a source of life. The intensity of the grief which afflicts the living

is such that life itself appears to be without meaning or significance. All sexual relations are forbidden so as not to create life after a relative has just lost his own. A child conceived during a period of mourning is mercilessly excluded by the head of the family from the moment of birth. Even the earth must stop producing and so it is strictly forbidden to cultivate and to sow.

The mourning process of the living is not synonymous with the absence of the deceased relative. It is a period of recognition of the pain caused by the loss of a loved one and precedes his reintroduction as a new and immortal being in the family's daily life. The reintroduction of this new being at the end of the mourning period is marked by a large reception where all members of the extended family, as well as friends and acquaintances convene. A fatted calf is slaughtered and the party continues throughout the night.

The ritual which marks the end of the period of mourning is called *ukwera*, which can be translated as 'whitening' or 'bleaching,' from the verb *kweza*, to bleach or lighten. Here, white is associated with light, which symbolizes rebirth and the return of the deceased relative among his family. This ritual is marked by the act which symbolizes procreation called *kuryamana*, meaning 'to sleep together.' The ritual can be physical (sexual relations between two parents who have lost a child) or symbolic (laying on the bed when one has lost a spouse or partner) and is a gesture that above all signifies renewed life. This ritual is not enacted if the death concerns a child that had not yet reached maturity or a young person who died before marriage.

After the ritual which marks the end of the mourning period, the deceased relative remains among family not only through memories, but above all through his presence as an ancestral protector and an intermediary between God and the members of his family. He is understood to be in the home and family members must provide him with nourishment by offering him his share during meals: a small spoonful of food or a few drops of liquid that are sprinkled ritually on the ground. It is also necessary to see to his psychological and moral needs by placing on the ground the tools which he once used to occupy his time (e.g. bows and arrows for hunting).

The purpose of the mourning period is to control the risk that the living may become overwhelmed by strong aggressive urges aroused by the death of a close relative, both by showing him care and keeping his memory alive, but also by maintaining a sense of his real presence within the family. This control may be more difficult to achieve when, for example, a family member dies while away from home with nobody to care for his remains, or if the death of a young member of the family is caused by war and the body is missing. Under these conditions, the mourning period offers no

solace. We all fear these deaths for which funeral rites and formal mourning practices are not possible because, in Rwandan tradition, these deaths are to blame for unleashing all sorts of ills, troubles and misfortunes.

The loss of a relative under circumstances where mourning is not possible is an absolute nightmare for members of the family. The intensity of psychological distress (complete loss of control) created by a death that is not associated with any traditional means of protection is so crushing that any Rwandan might well suffer a traumatic reaction. Trauma, here, is understood as the result of an intense experience that induces utter chaos, that is, the loss of all interior and exterior points of reference.

A traditional story allows us to appreciate the devastating effects of the inability to mourn on the physical and psychological integrity of survivors of traumatic loss.

A couple had five children. One day, the parents were chased from their home by assailants who then killed them some distance away. Upon entering the home, the children could not find them anywhere. The first lost his appetite and turned into a wasp with a pinched abdomen. The second ran wildly from place to place seeking information about them, and like a rabbit with long ears, he is still running. The third searched for his parents underground and was transformed into a mole. The fourth tried to follow the tracks of death like the scent of a polecat. The fifth orphan was the most desperate; he rolled himself in the dust and feathers appeared all over his body; and because of all his pouting, he grew a beak, long and curved, and we can still hear the plaintive cry of the bronzed ibis in the marshes.

Another Rwandan story shows that the forces of sadness and anger caused by trauma can spread like a contagious disease to all who are close to the victim and can lead to self-destruction or, at the very least, to paralyzing panic.

A kid accidentally overhears that a man intends to slit his throat. Overwhelmed by sadness and anger, he refuses to nurse. His mother questions him and, overcome as well, she refuses to run away from a leopard. Himself possessed by their sadness and anger, the leopard sits immobile before the man who shares his own feelings with a cow. As a result, the sadness and anger spreads among animals and men alike.

These two stories taken from Rwandan tradition suggest that the effects of sadness and anger are psychological manifestations of death, and show the attraction death exerts on the spirits of persons suffering great anguish.

STRATEGIES FOR DISTANCING FROM ANGER AND REVENGE

Rwandan tradition imposes a strict code of behavior when confronted with great sorrow. Self-control, discretion and the patience to wait for a

favorable moment to exact restitution or revenge for wrongs suffered are a part of the attitudes and behaviors highly valued by Rwandan culture. The metaphor 'tears that flow within' is a reminder of this cultural imperative linked to preserving control over painful emotions associated with experiencing difficult events (bereavement, trauma). This cultural law which demands that one must, at all costs, maintain control over emotions associated with extremely painful and sorrowful events was challenged by the news that my son had been murdered in an act of barbarism and extreme violence. There is little doubt that my mother sensed a risk that I might act out my thoughts, as she referred to the metaphors of 'rags' and 'nudity.' This Rwandan proverb, at first glance, appears to be a riddle in that it has a double meaning:

- (i) The metaphor of 'rags' can signify that when grief has reached its limits (to wear rags), there is still a feeling of hope at the possibility of opening up to another (to leave the house and let one's needs be known) which represents the bridge to healing.
- (ii) As for the metaphor of nudity, it appears to signify that when grief goes beyond the limits of endurance concerning another (to be naked), it carries with it a feeling of inner emptiness which signals the beginning of a tragedy and/or self-destruction during which the victim is almost paralyzed, no longer reacts and is infused with an emptiness like that of the living dead (remains alone in his house where no one can help).

The ambiguity or double meaning of this proverb captures the essence of Rwandan tradition dealing with the resolution and the meaning of vengeance. In the case of murder, traditional Rwandan law is clear: vengeance is the family's obligation. Revenge can be carried out without distinction on any male relative of the murderer's family. If the family does not satisfy this obligation, the spirits of the victim will take over by troubling the family in diverse ways in order to remind them of their duty.

In the case of the murder of a family member, Rwandan culture offers recourse in any one of three traditional attitudes:

- (i) The first attitude centers on the relative's desire for revenge. In this case, one death demands another and the pursuit of vengeance often signals the beginning of a tragedy that can lead to the destruction of an entire family.
- (ii) The second possible reaction, when confronted with the murder of a relative, is to encourage reconciliation through a marriage between the families of the victim and of the guilty party. In this case, the family of the victim receives a wife who will bear children to compensate for the loss. This new alliance unites two families, and the union

signals a conciliatory overture which can dissuade relatives of the victim from acting out their desire for vengeance.

- (iii) The third possible response to the murder of a relative is to consult the rules of hierarchy established by tradition. When the status of a family is not sufficiently important to pursue vengeance or organize a marriage alliance, the family of the victim must patiently await an opportune moment to exact reparation. The family of the victim is left paralyzed, unable to react, with an inner emptiness akin to that of the living-dead, compared with the more dominant family of the murderer which enjoys complete impunity.

In Rwandan cultural tradition, the ethics of intervention aim to create a distance from the desire for revenge by having wise elders take on the leadership role of defusing heightened feelings of rage and sadness that might otherwise have devastating effects on the physical and psychological health of family members. Among the ranks of the wise are mothers who have achieved the social status of *umukecuru*, meaning 'old woman' but signifying female wisdom. The masculine equivalent, *umusaza*, is typically reserved for those persons who are of an age to have grandchildren or, at least, gray hair.

To distance from the desire for revenge, it is considered wise to follow the advice of these elders who have experienced more in their lives and have a better understanding of what life is all about. The following story gives a vivid account of the tragedy that strikes a village that has ignored the advice of elders.

The young king of Bwidishyi, having recently ascended to the throne, proclaimed that power belonged to the youth. Irritated by the advice and criticism of the elderly, he ordered them all executed. After hunting one day, he brought back the magnificent hide of a zebra which he had tailored to fit him perfectly, but to his horror, as it dried the skin began to shrink and suffocate him. Hoping to please him as usual, his youthful entourage echoed his words. 'Men of Bwidishyi,' he cried, 'it is tightening!' 'Yes, Men of Bwidishyi,' the others echoed, 'it is tightening.' None dared use a knife to release him for fear of causing him harm (considered an act of sacrilege punishable by death). The king, half dead, asked to see a man of experience. An elderly man, who had been hidden away by his son, appeared before him. He soaked the king in a trough full of water and thereby saved him from suffocating without hurting him. The king decided the advice of the elderly should never again be ignored.

In Rwandan tradition, the elderly are considered sages with great life experience. As guides and interpreters of the moral code of their society, their mandate is to ensure the protection of the weak; that is, those persons without defenses who find themselves in unjust or unfortunate situations.

The first to be included among this group of sages are the parents who add to life experience, love and duty, and are able to guide their children when faced with instances of extreme psychological distress. Following this example, my mother, a symbol of female wisdom (*umukecuru*), had the right and the responsibility to intervene and guide me through this impossible situation of mourning, which according to our culture, causes immense psychological distress and carries with it the risk of acting out the desire for vengeance.

In an effort to avert the risks associated with situations in which mourning is impossible, Rwandan culture often turns to taboos and prohibitions. These taboos are traditional tools to prevent behaviors judged inappropriate that could have dire consequences both for the society in general and the family in particular. Prohibitions serve to prevent any intentions of acting out inappropriate behavior, in order to maintain good relations within the society.

Popular beliefs and practices in Rwanda tell us that maternal love allows mothers to anticipate the dangers or misfortunes that may threaten their children. These premonitions are felt in the breast which swells with milk (hence, the gesture of touching the breast), even for those mothers who are not nursing. Whenever a mother feels such a premonition, when her son is about to embark on a voyage fraught with peril, she places her belt (the gesture of loosening the knots) in his path to prevent his departure. This practice is called *gutambika umweka mw'irembo*, translated as 'barring the entrance with her belt.' Ignoring such a warning is considered an act of disobedience and brings with it severe consequences. Typically, it is considered the most effective way of discouraging dangerous ventures. According to Rwandan tradition, the mother's belt is considered a sacred object because it is this belt that covers the womb before the child is born. The belt remains a symbol of maternal protection even after birth. Mothers will use the belt wisely to ensure the safety of their children and to discourage foolishness. All Rwandans, regardless of age, conduct themselves according to this principle, as it is a sign of respect owed to the mother. The gesture of 'barring the entrance with her belt' sets an example in the following Rwandan story entitled *Intarabona*, translated as 'He who has yet to see anything', to signify a person without experience.

There was a man called Intarabona who owned many hunting dogs. One day, he awoke early to go hunting. His mother said: 'My son, make sure you do not hunt an animal called Impomahoma.' As he was preparing to leave, his mother stopped him and said: 'My son, there are ill omens surrounding this hunt, you risk death.' Intarabona said, 'I have made my decision, nothing can stop me.' Intarabona began to leave with his dogs for the hunt.

Enraged, his mother placed her belt across the doorway of the house saying: 'I want to see if you dare pass over your mother's belt!' In a single

leap, Intarabona jumped over the belt and left for the hunt. He took to the hunt with great enthusiasm as he loved the sport. He met many other hunters who admired his hunting dogs and further aroused his excitement.

Along the way, Intarabona met the great animal Impomahoma that his mother had forbidden him to kill. As Intarabona was pulling out an arrow, the animal told him: 'I am never anyone's target, I am not prey, any hunter who encounters me lets me leave in peace.' Intarabona let him leave but continued to follow him. The animal said to him: 'If you continue to track me, I will curse you because I am Imana of the forest, the spirit or power of the woods.' Imana (the spirit and power of the forest) told him: 'Do you not see that you are Intarabona – a man without experience? – go and try to be more aware in the future. Consider what is behind you as well. When you return home, may your cows be afraid of you, may your wife be afraid of you, may your parents be afraid of you, may people refuse to approach you.' So the eyes of Intarabona turned back and his ears grew above his head. Once home, everyone was afraid to approach him, he was unrecognizable. He sat alone in the passageway of his father's house.

One day, mother and son went to consult the soothsayers and brought with them some alcohol. They found an animal resting by the soothsayer. The mother said to him: 'Can you explain what has happened to this child?' The animal responded, 'Put down your beverages, I will drink and tell you what has happened to your child. They put down the alcohol and he drank it up. Impomahoma said, 'Oh child, was it not you who hunted me even though it is forbidden and your mother tried to stop you from hunting? I command you now: may your ears return to their normal size. But you must never again disregard your mother: see normally once again. Walk like everyone else.'

The power of prohibitions in the prevention of acting out rests on the traditional organization of the family, at the heart of which the mother plays a central role in teaching children the ancestral ways. Prohibitions are rules of life laid down by God for the ancestors who in turn pass them down to their descendants as part of the education of the family. They are a collection of popular practices respected by all Rwandans and regarded as a kind of social security with magico-religious force. No one knows the origins of these prohibitions and all are content to say that it has always been so.

CONCLUSION

In Rwandan culture, all transgressions of prohibitions are considered a rebellion against the ancestors and parental authority. They are often punished by attacks or possessions by spirits and powers of nature, resulting in sickness and misfortune that plague the guilty party, his family or community. Only the elders or sages can intervene to purify the victim by

implored the ancestors to tame the spirits, whose actions may be fatal, not only for the guilty party, but for the entire community as well.

The purification process begins with divinations performed by specialists (healers or fetishists) for the purpose of creating a link between the will of the sages and the intentions of the ancestors that are conveyed to the sages through these rites. While most Rwandans no longer follow these practices, everyone I met with during my stay in Rwanda spoke to me of evil spirits and supernatural forces unleashed on the country during the genocide and massacres of 1994 and of the necessity of cleansing the country to prevent the return of these evil forces with their murderous violence.

Rwandan culture had not anticipated the need for traditional techniques that could symbolize the experience of the genocide and collective massacres that befell Rwanda in 1994, and could serve to create a distance from acting out in response to the extremes of sadness and rage associated with this catastrophe. However, my own experience upon discovering that my son had been murdered showed the effectiveness of certain characteristics of Rwandan culture in confronting the great anger and sorrow associated with unbearable suffering. Traditional solutions served as external supports for my emotions, thoughts and spirit, as well as those of the young military officer I encountered.

Although traditional recourses were not intended for extreme situations like the genocide of 1994, the intervention used by my mother revealed the existence of traditional strategies appropriate to deal with problems associated with the armed conflict in Rwanda. The use of foreign therapeutic models, organized around concepts like 'post-traumatic stress disorder' must raise questions about their pertinence and their positive and negative effects. Even if a foreign model is not necessarily harmful, it must be examined with extreme care to avoid destroying the fragile internal equilibrium that is trying to re-establish itself. The mental health and well-being of Rwandans cannot be isolated from that of their families and those who surround them. When working with Rwandans, we must take into account the importance of maintaining harmony within the families and with those who surround them, and the repercussions that may result from interference. Traditional forms of expression (e.g. proverbs and tales), which offer the possibility of representing experiences and establishing a certain distance from feelings and acts of revenge, are essential in order to break the cycle of violence which has cast its shadow over Rwanda and its people.

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DÉOGRATIAS BAGILISHYA, DESS PSY, is a psychologist at the Transcultural Psychiatry Clinic of the Montreal Children's Hospital. Address: 4018 St-Catherine Street West, Montreal, Quebec, H3Z 1P2.