Being young and of mixed ethnicity in Rwanda

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The transition from childhood into adulthood is particularly complex for young people of mixed ethnic backgrounds who experience being 'out of place' twice: as young adults and as ethnically mixed. The challenges are clear in Rwanda.

Many young people of mixed ethnicity are growing up in the shadow of the war and genocide. They are confronted with many decisions, choices and challenges. Their mixed background has an effect on their social identities, emotions, friendships, love relations, and access to resources. They are 'out of place' in many ways: educationally, economically, socially and emotionally.

Yet, as they learn to navigate the complex post-genocide social landscape of Rwanda, their agency is visible in their choice of what to disclose and what to keep secret when they meet new people, join sports clubs, attend university or go for job interviews; in their choices of friends and partners; in deciding to leave their neighbourhoods, villages and country and go to places where their complex life history is less relevant; in finding strategies that minimise their suffering; and in focusing on what is valued in society like education and family.

Both inside Rwanda and abroad, community-level reconciliation initiatives offer these young people the opportunity to share their sufferings, to disclose their sense of isolation and to manage the stigma. For many, religion and faith are ways to make sense of the past and have hope in the future. Mental health initiatives also assist them to articulate their complex feelings and to work through them. In exile, shared commemorations for all those who died violently help them to give dignity to all their lost loved ones.

The 1994 genocide

Although there were many families of mixed ethnicity, these did not officially exist because ethnic registration was done at birth along patrilineal descent lines, meaning that children took on the ethnicity of their father. As violence escalated in the 1990s, members of families of mixed ethnicity were persecuted, attacked or forced to flee to avoid death. In general during ethnic clashes, families of mixed ethnicity are among the first victims of violence because they represent a threat to divisive ideologies.

Young boys and girls growing up in ethnically mixed families where the father was Hutu (and the mother Tutsi) were considered Hutu. Therefore they were not directly targeted for killing – but were forced to take sides and often to be involved in violence. Like other Hutu juveniles, the young men in these families were required to participate in roadblocks and patrols to identify, stop, arrest or kill Tutsi. If they resisted, they could be fined, forced to flee, or killed with the accusation of being accomplices of the enemy. At times, they were forced to witness violence being exercised upon their Tutsi cousins, relatives and even their own mother without being able to intervene. At other times, they risked their lives to protect their loved ones.

Rape is commonly used as a weapon of war to 'dilute' the ethnic purity of the victims' group, to humiliate its women and disgrace its men. Babies born out of war rapes become young adults of mixed ethnicity who are 'out of place' in many ways: they will grow up without a father, often unwelcomed by the maternal side of the family, and stigmatised by society.

During the 1994 genocide, individual and gang rapes took place and the children born from these forced sexual encounters are now teenagers of mixed ethnicity. These young people are angry and confused, struggling to make sense of their new personal and social identity, which carry stigma and shame. They are 'out of place' in post-genocide Rwanda where they find it difficult to reconcile their multiple identities: they are Hutu offspring yet they are raised by Tutsi mothers and they are children of genocide perpetrators who are raised by genocide victims. They who grew up thinking of themselves as 'genocide orphans' have to integrate the dissonant reality that they are also 'children of rape', a discovery that is likely to affect the ways in which they cope with love and future marriage prospects.

Being able to make sense of the tragedy is one of their greatest challenges, and as they grow up some young people have to provide for their imprisoned fathers while mourning the loss of their mother. On a daily basis, their life conditions are comparable to those of orphans. The elder siblings suddenly have to take on the role of heads of households with all the responsibilities and limitations that the new status entails.

Suppressing one's (mixed) identity

For refugees in general and for young refugees of mixed ethnicity in particular, identity politics and past experiences continue to matter in exile. Young Rwandan refugees of mixed ethnicity were additionally 'out of place' in camps, where they were pushed into emphasising one side of their ethnicity and minimising or hiding the other.

Some of those who fled violence with other survivors and reached refugee camps across the border in Burundi felt ostracised and threatened when survivors accused them of having been connected to the Hutus who had been manning the checkpoints to prevent them from fleeing.

Those who fled with the Hutu population towards the end of the genocide found that in refugee camps across the region, and especially those situated in eastern Zaire where the genocide leaders took refuge together with the civilian population, a strong pro-Hutu ideology continued to prevail. Here, young people of mixed ethnicity had to subscribe to the extremist Hutu version of violence, to value their Hutu identity at the expense of their Tutsi identity, and to downplay their connections

to – and to distance themselves from – the victorious Tutsi enemy back in Rwanda. This task was easier for young people growing up in mixed families headed by a Hutu because they could be regarded as Hutu but it was more difficult for young people (especially boys) who had fled with their Hutu mother and maternal relatives following the death of their Tutsi father.

Inside Rwanda, the reverse phenomenon occurred. As the government legally banned any explicit reference to ethnicity, the new social categories *rescapé* (Tutsi genocide survivor) and *génocidaire* (Hutu genocide perpetrator) gained prominence. Young people of mixed ethnicity who returned and those who remained behind found it advantageous to emphasise their Tutsi connections and to downplay their Hutu identity and relations. This task was easier for adolescents whose father was Tutsi who could self-identify as 'genocide survivors' and could therefore access survivors' funds or acquire the social status of 'genocide survivor' or 'genocide orphan'. It was more difficult for those whose father was Hutu because they were regarded as Hutus.

Rwandans in general are aware that young people of mixed ethnicity face many challenges and they often said that it was "very difficult" for these youngsters to belong because they are being "pushed away" by both sides of their extended family. Each side perceives them as members of the other side and is accordingly suspicious.

These perceptions also influence the ways in which inter-ethnic love relations develop and marriages take place. In Rwandan culture, families can influence dating patterns, they can approve or refuse to approve relationships and they can support or hinder marriage prospects. Since 1994, the number of mixed marriages has dramatically declined. Young people's choices are restricted when families of survivors or returnees discover that a member of the extended family is accused of genocide involvement, and it is said that young adults of mixed ethnicity tend to marry into the Hutu group where they are less ostracised. When mixed marriages take place, young families have to cope with their relatives' criticism or opposition.

Reconciliation, commemorating, mourning and justice

Through memorialisation, post-conflict societies remember their violent past, mourn their dead and strive towards social recovery. The post-1994 Rwandan government designated the month of April as the national month of remembrance of the genocide and of those who died in it.

Young people of mixed ethnicity find these memorial ceremonies difficult to cope with. They are encouraged to publicly mourn the deaths of their Tutsi families and relatives who died during the genocide, and this rekindles their suffering. At the same time, the deaths of their Hutu family members and relatives who perished on account of their 'moderate' political beliefs, or because they resisted involvement in violence or protected Tutsi, are marginalised in these public commemorations. Young adults of mixed ethnicity are likely to have suffered multiple losses on both sides of their family in different places and at different times. It is very difficult for them

15th anniversary genocide commemorations, Butare, 2009. Banner reads: You are the loss that shall never be replaced

to be able to mourn collectively all their loved ones who perished violently. One survivor who lost his Tutsi mother who was murdered and his Hutu father who was killed while trying to protect the Tutsi stated that during official commemorations "people think that I cry for them but I cry for myself".

As justice ran its course, reconciliation initiatives took place inside Rwanda as well as transnationally among the refugee diaspora. To promote reconciliation, the government called on the *génocidaires* to ask for forgiveness and asked the *rescapés* to bestow forgiveness. Young people of mixed ethnicity find it difficult to accept the fact that they belong to both the group expected to forgive and the one asking for forgiveness. In conversations on forgiveness, one young Rwandan said that it is difficult for him to understand the meaning of forgiveness: who forgives whom and for what? how can one distinguish between formal and sincere forgiveness? is there a choice not to forgive?

These young people are 'out of place' within national narratives of justice and reconciliation that do not necessarily contemplate the possibility of having multiple identities, divergent loyalties and complex life circumstances. Only in informal spaces, within families or among close friends, or occasionally during community-level reconciliation can young people of mixed ethnicity openly express their ambivalent emotions, have their complex life circumstances acknowledged and feel supported.

It is important that policymakers, civil society and humanitarian agencies working in post-conflict environments and refugee contexts recognise the specific challenges that young people of mixed ethnicity encounter, and acknowledge their agency. In this way, they can better support them to negotiate their multiple identities, manage ambivalent loyalties, develop friendships and love relationships, remember the past and fully engage in reconciliation processes for the future.

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