

Mourning

Possibility or Impasse?

Catharine Newbury



Electronic version

URL: [http://](http://etudesafriaines.revues.org/4683)

etudesafriaines.revues.org/4683

DOI: 10.4000/etudesafriaines.4683

ISSN: 1777-5353

Publisher

Éditions de l'EHESS

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 January 2004

Number of pages: 428-430

ISBN: 978-2-7132-1823-1

ISSN: 0008-0055

Electronic reference

Catharine Newbury, « Mourning », *Cahiers d'études africaines* [Online], 173-174 | 2004, Online since 08 March 2007, connection on 25 January 2017. URL : <http://etudesafriaines.revues.org/4683> ; DOI : 10.4000/etudesafriaines.4683

The text is a facsimile of the print edition.

© Cahiers d'Études africaines

les crimes et d'établir des responsabilités et l'identité des coupables et des victimes, de proposer des mesures susceptibles de promouvoir la réconciliation et le pardon, de décider la restitution de leurs biens aux ayant-droit, de clarifier toute l'histoire du Burundi.

Les membres de la Commission, nommés par le gouvernement, émanent de la société civile, des partis politiques, des confessions religieuses. Les individus peuvent se porter candidats. La commission fera son travail sur une période de deux ans.

Cette initiative peut avoir des retombées programmatiques si elle est minutieusement mise en place. Ses membres doivent être reconnus des Burundais pour leur probité et leur honnêteté. La période prévue par l'accord d'Arusha est trop courte si on tient compte du travail qui doit être fait, et surtout de son importance pour la réconciliation des Burundais. Les querelles partisans lors de la constitution de cette commission doivent être évitées sinon sa mission sera hypothéquée.

La mise en place de la commission ne se ferait pas si l'opinion publique n'est pas bien informée, car son soutien est capital. Il ne faudrait pas que les travaux de la commission se déroulent dans un climat de méfiance. La tribalisation de la société burundaise devrait être évitée au profit de l'identité citoyenne.

Université du Burundi.

Commentaires

Mourning. Possibility or Impasse?⁹

At the panel on which the papers by Augustin Nsanze and Melchior Mukuri were presented¹⁰, three general observations emerged that are relevant to the present commentary. First, to be effective in promoting reconciliation in a society, mourning needs to be inclusive. A process that is not inclusive may provide an outlet for some groups in the society to come to terms with their past, but undermine prospects for reconciliation by marginalizing the

9. The author gratefully acknowledges the support of a research and writing grant from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation.

10. "Memory and Mourning for the Traumatic Past: New Present and a Shared Future in the Great Lakes Region?", panel at the Annual Meeting of the African Studies Association, Washington DC, 5-8 December 2002.

excluded group or groups¹¹. Second, history matters: breaking with the past is often an important part of mourning. Truth-telling can make a positive contribution to mourning—allowing participants to bury the past, accept a loss, and move beyond this loss and tragedy to a different future. Yet such reassessment needs to be honest and balanced, refusing to ignore uncomfortable truths¹². Finally, achieving change is central to the mourning process, but in the Great Lakes region, what kind of change is needed is contested.

Keeping these points in mind, one can see that Mukuri and Nsanze each address questions of critical importance for mourning and the future of Burundi: what can stop the repetitive cycles of violence that have come to dominate Burundi politics and tear apart the social fabric? How might a process of mourning serve as a vehicle for transcending the past and promoting a different future for the people of the country? Both authors emphasize the gravity of the Burundi crisis; consider it important to come to terms with the country's past; and recommend an inclusive approach in efforts to promote mourning and reconciliation—and change.

Yet Mukuri and Nsanze do not agree on how Burundi might achieve effective mourning, or on what types of change are needed. This divergence arises from their different views of Burundi's history, what is problematic about it, and what is needed to transcend it.

Mukuri sees the root of the problem in violent incidents since Burundi's independence in 1962—involving repeated cycles of violence that have spawned a culture of vengeance. For him, to transcend this past requires internal discussion and debate to unveil what happened and who was responsible—as a basis for shared mourning. Acknowledging that violence has been committed on all sides, Mukuri suggests that mourning could be promoted by a peace and reconciliation commission for Burundi as stipulated in the Arusha agreement for Burundi of August 2002. He believes this will make it possible to determine who was responsible for acts of violence, to allow victims to make judgments about pardon or punishment, and to provide for restitution. Mukuri expresses hope for such a process, modeled on the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, as an effective vehicle for acknowledging and transcending the past. But he says certain

-
11. Claudine Vidal makes a similar point regarding commemorations of violent and tragic events in her analysis of state-sponsored commemoration of the genocide in Rwanda. Such commemorations in Rwanda, Vidal argues, have undermined rather than promoted reconciliation for two main reasons: the rituals of commemoration at the national level since 1996 have tended to promote the political interests of the government rather than responding to the needs and concerns of survivors; and for the most part these commemorations have excluded victims other than Tutsi. Claudine VIDAL, "Les commémorations du génocide au Rwanda", *Les temps modernes*, 613 (mars-avril-mai 2001), pp. 1-46.
 12. Danielle DE LAME, "(Im)possible Belgian Mourning for Rwanda", paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the African Studies Association, Washington DC, 5-8 December 2002. As de Lame reminds us, a distorted history, or one that avoids recognizing the responsibilities of different parties, is likely to impede, rather than promote, an effective mourning process.

conditions must be fulfilled: the commission must have broad public support; members of the commission must be representative of Burundi's different groups; and selection of the members should be conducted in a nonpartisan fashion.

Nsanze's analysis seems to show why establishing those conditions is unlikely. While agreeing that a rupture with the past is needed, Nsanze means something different by this than Mukuri. The "past" to which Nsanze refers includes the legacy of colonialism and the Burundi monarchy, as well as the history of the Republic in Burundi from 1966. For Nsanze, the legacy of inequality and oppression from these earlier periods is still present in Burundi today. Moreover, the experience of the Republic, in which a minority seized power in the name of racial superiority, excluding the majority of the population from power and denying them political rights, has yet to be transcended. This minority still controls military might. That is what needs to change, Nsanze argues. He advocates a shift to majority rule in both Rwanda and Burundi as the prerequisite for peace in Burundi, Rwanda, and the larger Great Lakes region. Without that, if the past lives on in the present, he argues, effective mourning is not possible.

Thus, while Mukuri favors a type of judicial proceeding that allocates blame and provides for restitution, Nsanze calls for more systemic change that would alter the inequalities of power and wealth that pervade Burundi (and Rwanda). Mukuri, expressing faith in a narrowly defined process that appears feasible, concludes with a cautiously optimistic prognosis. Nsanze, emphasizing the constraints to systemic change that he believes impede effective mourning, perceives an impasse that makes him deeply pessimistic.

The commonalities as well as the polarities in these texts are instructive. Critical appraisal of the strengths and shortcomings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in South Africa¹³ could provide insights on the likely impact of such a process in Burundi. Meanwhile, it is clear that promoting a process of mourning in Burundi will require coming to terms with divergent perceptions of the past (and the lived present), as well as discussion and analysis of more hopeful imagined futures.

Catharine NEWBURY, *Smith College, Northampton, Massachusetts.*

Engaging with the Past to Engage with the Future: Two Visions of History

These two texts are starkly different. One looks to the future, the other to the past. One is programmatic, the other analytic. One focuses on victims, the other on causes. One is concerned with individual suffering, the other with state power.

13. For such an appraisal, see Bogumil JEWSIEWICKI, "De la vérité de mémoire à la réconciliation: Comment travaille le souvenir?", *Le Débat*, no. 122 (novembre-décembre 2002), pp. 63-77.