

CULTURAL TRAUMA

1. Introduction

The term cultural trauma can be defined as a memory which is accepted as true and unforgettable by a specific cultural group and evokes a state that is heavily loaded with negative affect, this memory is furthermore also believed to be violating fundamental cultural presuppositions and thus it threatens the existence of the cultural group. Literature suggests that cultural trauma affects a group with definable membership. (Alexander, Eyerman, Giesen, Smelser, & Sztompka, 2004)

The difference between psychological or physical trauma and cultural trauma needs to be considered as it is in the difference between these two constructs that the true definition of cultural trauma lies. Psychological or physical trauma affects an individual and is said to involve a wound as well as emotional distress whereas cultural trauma is said to affect a group of individuals bound by a considerable degree of cohesion and therefore cultural trauma may even cause a considerable loss of one's identity and meaning as it brings about a tear in the social fabric. (Eyerman, 2001)

2. The semiotics of cultural trauma

Different than the criteria for individual trauma exposure where the individual needs to directly experience or feel the trauma in order to be affected by it is that it is not necessary for all the individuals of the cultural group to directly experience or feel the trauma in order to be affected by it. The prerequisite for an event to be labelled as a cultural trauma is that a significant cause needs to be identified along with the establishment and acceptance of the traumatic meaning of the event. The establishment and acceptance of the traumatic meaning of the event is a process that requires a great deal of time, meditation and representation. (Eyerman, 2001)

Thus the event needs to become a shared negative value. The event can only become a shared negative value over the passage of time. The amount of time needed for the event to be considered a shared negative value is directly linked to the severity of the trauma and therefore the more severe the trauma the greater the period of time needed for it to be assimilated into the shared values of the cultural group or community, this process is furthermore also helped along by mediations as well as carriers and caretakers. The acknowledgment of a cultural trauma is seen as a form of social caring. (Sundholm, unknown)

3. Trauma is seen as the new cultural narrative

In order for the conveying of the cultural traumatic event to individuals of the cultural group or society in general to be seen as effective certain elements need to be included in the narrative so as to ensure that the entire scenario is sketched without any details being left out. It is vital for all the facts to be known as this will contribute to the event being shared as a negative value. The nature of the pain or in other words what has happened during the traumatic event needs to be explained as well as to whom the victims were. It is also important to convey the relationship between the victims of the event with those whom are being informed of the event. Lastly it must also be reported whom is responsible for the traumatic event. (Alexander, Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity, 2011)

4. Genocide in Rwanda

April, the 6th, 1994 saw the birth of one of the bloodiest and most brutal genocides ever to be recorded. It is said that Rwanda had a population of 7 million people which was made up of three ethnic groups. The Hutu's was the majority group and made up 5.9 million people of the population, the Tutsi's was the largest minority group and made up 980 000 people of the population, the remaining 80 000 was made up of the Twa people. The event that led to the initiation of the genocide was the shooting down of Rwandan President Habyarimana's airplane over Kigali. President Habyarimana was a Hutu, with him on the airplane was Burundian President Cyprien Ntaryamira; no one survived the attack. It is still not clear up to this day as to whom shot down the plane as some speculate it was the Tutsi rebels and others speculate that it was the Hutu extremists. (The Rwandan Genocide, n.d.)

The history of Rwanda is filled with wars and violence between the Hutu's and the Tutsi's and the tension was yet again mounting between the Hutu's and the Tutsi's as the Hutu extremists blamed the Tutsi's for the increasing social, economic and political pressures. Rwanda was under Tutsi control prior to the election of President Habyarimana and he made sure that the Hutu's and Tutsi's were driven further apart. The Tutsi-dominated rebel group known as the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) was operating within Rwanda and it had great support from the Tutsi civilians. The RPF was successful in both the battlefield as well as with negotiating with the Hutu leaders of Rwanda. (Genocide in Rwanda)

The shooting down of the president's plane was seen by the Hutu's as an initiation of war by the Tutsi's and violence immediately erupted. Hutu extremists implemented plans to rid Rwanda of Tutsi's in order to reinstate the solidarity of the Hutu and help them win the war. The plan of the Hutu's consisted of killing Tutsi's, those suspected of being Tutsi as well as all those opposed to their actions. The Hutu's invaded the homes of Tutsi's and wiped out entire families at a time, women were systematically and brutally raped as a means of further degrading them. Those who thought they were lucky enough to escape from their homes were caught up in roadblocks across Rwanda and was killed on the spot. (Genocide in Rwanda)

The genocide initially started with grenades and guns but soon the weapons of choice became machetes, clubs or knives. Some of the Tutsi's whom miraculously managed to flee from their houses and avoided the road blocks looked for refuge in churches, schools and hospitals where they were later found and murdered. In one instance a Hutu mayor invited Tutsi's to seek refuge in the local church, this was a trap as he later betrayed them to the Hutu extremists. Those who were killed were left right there where they were slaughtered as a means of further degrading the Tutsi's. (Rosenberg, n.d.) Based on these recollections of the events one can say that the killings were not only bizarre in magnitude but also extremely bizarre and brutal in deed as well.

The genocide continued for a 100 days and it is estimated that nearly 200 000 Hutu's participated in the killing of 800 000 Tutsi men, women and children. The Hutu's thus nearly reached their target of wiping out the Tutsi's as they slaughtered 82% of the Tutsi population. (Genocide in Rwanda) It must be noted that even though the Rwandans are solely responsible for organising and executing the genocide that the entire world needs to share in the shame of the act as not one country or organisation intervened in the fate of the Tutsi's of Rwanda. Many Western countries knew of the preparations being made by the Hutu's to wipe out the Tutsi's but not one of them reacted to prevent nor intervene once the genocide had started, in actual fact most of these countries denied that a genocide was underway in Rwanda for quite some time. (Rosenberg, n.d.)

The genocide came to an end in the middle of July in 1994. The end of the genocide was brought on by the continuous fighting of the RPF, through their military action they managed to slowly retake control over Rwanda. Thus the genocide only came to an end once they had complete control over the country. (Rosenberg, n.d.)

The genocide did not only leave behind hundreds of thousands of bodies but left the entire Rwanda psychologically traumatised due to the fact that entire families were wiped and the entire country was ransacked and destroyed. The genocide forced roughly 2 million of those who managed to escape their homes and elude the roadblocks to flee from Rwanda and seek refuge in neighbouring countries. Statistics showed that nearly a million people were moved from their original geographical areas to other areas within Rwanda. The children of Rwanda endured great trauma as at least 100 000 of them were either orphaned, abducted, abandoned or in other means separated from their families; these children were also exposed to the horrific brutality of the genocide and most of them felt that they would die at some point during the genocide. The Hutu children were also traumatised and investigations discovered that nearly 400 Hutu children, of which a number of them being younger than the age of 10, participated in the genocide. (Reid, 2014) (Melvern, 2011)

Taking all the above into account one can conclude that the Rwanda genocide of 1994 can be classified as being a cultural trauma.

5. Persecution of Christians in Iraq and Syria

The Christian population of Northern Iraq and Syria have been in existence for nearly 2000 years, roughly 600 years before Islam and a census has shown that the Christian religion had 1.5 million followers in this region alone. Shocking statistics now show that only 200 000 Christians remain in this region, with the most of these individuals being gone. No introduction is needed as to where the Christians have gone as it is well-known that the ISIS or the Islamic State as they are also known have declared war against the Christians. The Christian population is busy disappearing at an alarming rate due to the persecution it faces by the ISIS even though the Christian religion is the oldest religion in the region. (ISIS on Christians: "There is nothing to give them but the sword", 2014) (Macfarlan, 2014)

Newspaper headlines state that the ISIS has probably made its last threat against the Christians by stating that the only way to deal with the Christians is to execute them, these threats turned into full blown attacks against the Christians and led to many of the Christians fleeing from the region into the desert or to refugee camps, others hide out in their homes waiting to be killed. (ISIS on Christians: "There is nothing to give them but the sword", 2014) The persecution in Northern Iraq and Syria is based on religion and not on ethnicity as in Rwanda and therefore people are given a chance to live if they betray Jesus Christ and accept the Islamic faith, the price for refusing is either your life or the life of a loved one. (Macfarlan, 2014)

As said many Christians have fled from their homes in attempts to escape the massacre, those lucky enough to be allowed through the Islamic State checkpoints were thieved from their belongings and was only left with their clothes. The Islamic soldiers confiscate anything of value and even take the food and water packed by the Christians to last them on their journey. Reports say that Christians who have fled are missing and no one has heard from them again, it is feared that the Christian population is on the verge of extinction in this region. (ISIS on Christians: "There is nothing to give them but the sword", 2014)

The global media is flooded with articles and images of the horrific acts of the Jihadists in attempts to raise awareness all over the world. The images portrayed in these articles and journals is filled with horror. One of these articles tells the story of a peaceful park in Mosul, this same park no longer speaks of tranquillity but serves as a warning sign for Christians to either flee, convert, pay the fine or have their children's heads placed on stick in the park along the heads of other Christian children whose parents did not give in to the demands of the ISIS. The killings of the Christian children are brutal and gut-wrenching, too despicable to mention. (ISIS begins killing Christians in Mosul, CHILDREN BEHEADED, 2014)

Yet another incident which made headlines is the killing of four Christian boys, all younger than 15 years old, who refused to convert to Islam. The Islamic State entered their town in Iraq and confronted the boys and were told to convert to Islam or die. The boys stood up to their oppressors and said that they love and always loved Jesus and that He has always been there with and for them and that they cannot and will not betray Him and accept Mohammad. The result of these boys' solid faith in Christ resulted in their beheading. (ISIS begins killing Christians in Mosul, CHILDREN BEHEADED, 2014)

The Christians are either shot or decapitated, others are hanged or crucified; the Christian women are being raped before they are murdered. Other Christian women are taken as wives by the ISIS fighters and this gives them the right to either rape or kill them if they refuse to convert to Islam. What is even more disturbing than the countless attacks on the Christians of Iraq and Syria is that the Islamic State revel in their killings as they are convinced that they are doing the work of Allah. The extremists are making music videos while murdering and decapitating the Christians, they are enjoying the killings and the region has seen a massive surge of Muslims from all over the world whom wants to share in the bloodshed. These acts are instilling Christians with fear, anxiety and suffering. (ISIS begins killing Christians in Mosul, CHILDREN BEHEADED, 2014)

When the persecution of the Christians in Iraq and Syria is compared to other genocides it is clear that the world has not seen anything like this in decades, the closest match to these sadistic acts is the Rape of Nankang during the Second World War. Nobody is rushing towards the aid of the Christians in these regions, they are all left to their own fate even though the world pledged to never allow another holocaust to take place again. Billions of people stand by in pure awe and disgust of these acts but little is being done to aid these Christians. (ISIS on Christians: "There is nothing to give them but the sword", 2014)

The magnitude of the persecution of Christians is not confined to only the Christians of Iraq and Syria but includes the global Christian culture due to the fact that the ISIS is launching attacks all over the world. The latest attack being the attack at the Bardo museum in Tunisia in which 19 people lost their lives. The ISIS claimed responsibility for the attack online and made a further threat to all those that oppose them that this act was just the start of many more to follow. (Byrne & Graham-Harrison, 2014) What is clear from the acts in Iraq and Syria is that when the ISIS makes a threat they intend to follow through on it (ISIS on Christians: "There is nothing to give them but the sword", 2014), and therefore the entire Christian culture is at risk of being targeted.

6. Conclusion

Based on the above, especially the persecution of the Christians, the author wish to conclude that the definition and description of cultural trauma is true in the sense that an individual from the culture affected need not be directly affected by the traumatic event in order to experience trauma due to the fact that the author himself is emotionally, psychologically and spiritually affected by the persecution of his fellow Christians and takes the threat of the ISIS seriously. Cultural trauma is present in South Africa under all the cultures and therefore there is not any one population group exempted from experiencing trauma.

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