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# Restoring Civil Societies

## The Psychology of Intervention and Engagement Following Crisis

Edited by

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## Social Rituals and Collective Expression of Emotion After a Collective Trauma

### Participation in Gacaca and Assimilation of the Rwandan Genocide

*Bernard Rimé, Patrick Kanyangara, Dario Paéz, and Vincent Tserbyt*

This chapter aims to examine how far collective rituals instigated at a socio-political level are able to modify the social attitudes that prevail in populations following conflict, violations of human rights, or massacres. This examination relies on two studies conducted in the framework of the Truth and Reconciliation procedure that was developed in the post-genocide era in Rwanda, under the name of “Gacaca” (pronounced *gachataha*). First, we briefly recall what a Truth and Reconciliation procedure represents, and describe the situation facing Rwanda after the 1994 genocide. Next, we discuss the expected effects of Truth and Reconciliation procedures and examine a theoretical model we have adopted in this regard. Finally, we consider the findings from studies designed to test this model.

### Truth and Reconciliation Procedures

Truth and Reconciliation procedures are a popular tool for transitioning to peace in the aftermath of a civil war or oppressive regimes.

Although they have gone by many different names, since 1974 at least 25 official Truth and Reconciliation commissions have been established around the world (Freeman & Hayner, 2003). These represent temporary, non-judicial institutions empowered by the state that provide a safe and impartial forum in which victims, offenders, and other community members can actively participate. Conflicting parties are expected to hear each other's grievance and suffering. A primary purpose of such procedures is to help establish the truth about the past. Historical accounting via truth telling and confronting the past is believed to contribute to reconciliation by granting victims public acknowledgement of their pain, by preventing offenders taking the path of denial, and by offering future generations the opportunity to understand and learn from the past (Huyse, 2003; see Paez & Liu, 2010 for a discussion of the role of collective memory in overcoming conflicts). Further, Truth and Reconciliation procedures are meant to promote understanding and to build up empathy between those who were former enemies. This latter perspective was at the focus of our investigations.

### Rwanda and Gacaca

In Rwanda, it is estimated that between April and July 1994, more than 800 000 Tutsis were killed in a genocide. Additionally, tens of thousands of Hutus were killed during the same period for being too moderate or too sympathetic to Tutsis. Although much of the state and the economy were subsequently rebuilt, the emotional harms still lingered in Rwandese society. A complex emotional climate prevailed involving feelings of anger, resentment, shame, sadness, and distrust.

In this context, achieving justice and reconciliation represented a particularly critical challenge. Some 130 000 persons accused of participation in the genocide were imprisoned. No regular justice system could face such large numbers. To deal with this challenge, a traditional Rwandan community-based conflict resolution system called Gacaca was adapted for judging all those accused of participation in the genocide. This modernized Gacaca constituted an unprecedented socio-legal experiment, both in terms of its size and its scope. Gacaca tribunals were composed of persons of integrity elected by the inhabitants of cells, sectors, districts, and provinces throughout the country. Prisoners were brought before the tribunal in the community where they had allegedly committed a crime. In their presence, in the spirit of Truth and Reconciliation procedures, survivors and the entire community discussed the alleged acts, providing testimony and

counter-testimony. Prisoners who confessed before the proceedings could benefit from important reductions in sentences.

### Truth and Reconciliation Procedures: Do They Heal the Past?

In a Truth and Reconciliation procedure, past traumatic events are recalled, sufferings are verbalized, and related emotions are expressed. Freudian psychology has promoted the view that dealing with repressed pain and willing the truth out is instrumental in restoring psychological health. Theologians have also expressed similar ideas in the domain of moral healing. In line with such perspectives, it is widely assumed that simply giving victims and witnesses a chance to tell their stories to an official commission should bring them healing (e.g., Hayner, 2001; Herman, 1992). This linkage of expression, truth telling, and healing was particularly explicit in the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) with the abundant use of slogans such as "Revealing is healing." This considerably strengthened the assumption that truth telling is healing and *thereby* leads to reconciliation. The international interest and attention this commission stimulated led to the expectation that truth commissions all over the world would be equally healing for both the individual and the social body (Lund, 2003; Minow, 1998).

However, claims linking the expression of past misdeeds, healing, and reconciliation have also elicited important criticisms. Ignatieff (1996) pointed that collectivities are not homologous with the individual mind, thus stressing that concepts borrowed from Freudian psychology were not appropriate for predicting what would happen in a society. Mendeloff (2004) insisted that claims about the benefits of truth telling, reconciliation, and peace relied on flawed assumptions and faith rather than on empirical evidence. Indeed, efforts to assess the assumed effects of truth and reconciliation procedures on the psychological health of individuals and society as a whole are still surprisingly scarce. In the first published study, Kaminer, Stein, Mbanga, and Zungu-Dirwayi (2001) compared three groups of victims of human rights violations who had either testified at a public hearing of the TRC, or given a closed statement to a statement taker, or neither of these two options. This comparison revealed no significant differences between these groups in terms of psychiatric diagnosis or forgiveness attitudes. Negative, rather than merely neutral, effects of participation in Truth and Reconciliation processes have also been identified. For example,

Byrne (2004) observed that for 80 percent of 30 South African survivors who had testified in the TRC, testifying represented a painful and disempowering experience. Similarly, Brounéus (2008) compared 1200 adults who were witnesses in the Gacaca to non-witnesses and found the former to manifest higher levels of depression and post-traumatic stress disorder.

Thus, the rare empirical evidence that is available to date has failed to support the assumption that truth telling is straightforwardly healing. At best, no effect has been found. At worst, witnessing in a truth commission led to retraumatization. This presents a risk that the enthusiasm which spread truth commissions to post-conflict societies across the world may dissolve in the future, together with the hopes that these ideas have awoken.

### **A Psychosocial Perspective on Truth and Reconciliation Procedures**

Instead of a straightforwardly healing view on Truth and Reconciliation procedures, we have adopted a psychosocial perspective that builds on a classic model of the effects of participation in collective rituals (Collins, 2004; Paez, Rimé, & Basabe, 2005). This model was proposed by Durkheim (1912) in his book *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Durkheim's model stressed that collective events such as commemorations, celebrations, feasts, and demonstrations generally involve the simultaneous presence of group symbols (e.g., flags, emblems) and of participants' collective expressions (e.g., singing, yelling, telling words or sentences, shared movements, music and dance). Both aptly awaken the latent social dimension of every human being. Particularly central to Durkheim's view was that in such contexts, individual consciousnesses echo one another. When a common emotional event is recalled collectively, any expression of emotion by individual participants vividly elicits analogous feelings in the people around them such that a reciprocal stimulation of emotion follows.

Consistent with this perspective, recent research confirms that emotions elicit a social sharing process. Indeed, it has been demonstrated that the experience of an emotion systematically leads the subject to talk about that emotion, which in turn arouses emotions among listeners (for a review, see Rimé, 2009). The experience of these emotions, their public expression, and their social sharing all concur to propagate similar emotional feelings in the audience and to stimulate further emotional expression. As a result, the various emotions attached to the

commemorated episode are intensely reactivated among all ritual participants. Such a circular process favors the development of a state of emotional communion in the group. Feelings of group belongingness and social consensus become set at the foreground of participants' representations. Consequently, the salience of the individual self is lowered and collective identity is enhanced such that participants end up experiencing feelings of unity and of similarity: "we are all one." Durkheim thus considered emotional communion as *the* tool through which social rituals reconstruct participants' collective identity.

Two testable predictions relevant to effects of TRC can be derived from this model. First, and at odds with popular claims linking emotional expression to healing, Durkheim's reasoning predicts that taking part in a collective emotional event would reactivate emotional upset among all participants. Due to strong mutual emotional stimulation in the collective process, negative emotions should be increased rather than decreased after participation. The second prediction resulting from Durkheim's model regards social variables. Specifically, participation in a collective ritual should enhance participants' perceived social cohesion and feelings of group belonging. When the specific purpose of a collective ritual is reconciliation, as is the case in Truth and Reconciliation procedures, such effects would of course be particularly suitable.

### **Overview of Our First Investigation**

In a preliminary examination of these ideas, Kanyangara, Rimé, Philippot, & Yzerbyt (2007) tested the impact of Gacaca tribunals on emotions (Prediction 1) and on social variables (Prediction 2). Fifty survivors of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda and 50 prisoners accused of being responsible for genocidal acts completed questionnaires 45 days before and 45 days after their participation in a Gacaca trial. The questionnaires assessed both emotional and social variables. For emotional variables respondents rated first the extent to which they presently felt basic emotions such as sadness, fear, anger, disgust, anxiety, and shame with regard to the genocide. Next, they rated the emotional climate reigning in their community, a variable reflecting the type of emotional relationships (e.g., distrust, solidarity, mutual confidence, anxiety) prevailing between members of the society (de Rivera & Paez, 2007). Based upon Durkheim's theory, we predicted that among both survivors and prisoners, participation to the Gacaca would arouse negative emotions and would impact negatively on the emotional climate they perceive in their society. Conversely, the social variables

were essentially intended to assess social integration. Firstly, participants rated how much they endorsed negative stereotypes of the "outgroup" (i.e., how survivors perceived prisoners as a group and vice versa). Secondly, respondents rated how much they viewed outgroup members as similar to one another. The latter measurement reflects prior research on stereotyping and intergroup relations which demonstrates that one signature of intergroup prejudice is to consider outgroups as homogeneous ("they are all alike") and to view members of an outgroup as more similar to one another than are ingroup members (Yzerbyt, Judd, & Corneille, 2004). In line with Durkheim's view that participation in collective rituals should enhance social integration, we thus expected that participation in Gacaca would impact upon intergroup perception in the form of (1) a reduction of the negative stereotypes survivors and prisoners held toward each other, and (2) a reduction in the perceived homogeneity of outgroup members.

The data collected for our emotional variables revealed that, with the exception of anger (which decreased among prisoners and remained stable among survivors), all the other negative emotions (e.g., sadness, fear, anxiety) were markedly enhanced after participation in the Gacaca, especially among survivors. With respect to the perceived emotional climate, as was expected given the reactivation of negative memories of extreme intergroup conflict, the emotional climate was rated as more negative after the Gacaca than before. This decline was steeper for survivors than it was for prisoners. Thus, the various observations for emotional variables reflected the emotional reactivation effects predicted by Durkheim's model.

As for the social variables, before the Gacaca survivors held more stereotyped views of prisoners than the other way round. However, in line with the predictions, negative stereotypes toward the other group markedly decreased after the Gacaca, both among survivors and among prisoners. This effect was particularly pronounced for stereotypes held by survivors about the prisoners. With respect to perceived outgroup homogeneity, the data confirmed a marked reduction of perceived outgroup similarity after the Gacaca, both in the survivor and the prisoner samples. Thus, the results for both indices of social cohesion were also fully supportive of Durkheim's hypothesis. Although it was emotionally intense, the social ritual of Gacaca increased social cohesion at least in two ways: by lessening the negative stereotypes attributed to the outgroup and by reducing the perceived similarity attached to outgroup members. Such a double effect reflects the creation of a psychosocial context in which prejudice is less likely to take place.

In sum, the results of this first study brought us two sets of facts supporting the predictions from Durkheim's model. On the one hand, participation in this collective ritual was predictive of enhanced negative emotions. On the other hand, participation also predicted positive effects under the form of enhanced social integration.

### Purposes of the Second Investigation

An obvious limitation of our first study was the absence of control groups of participants not yet exposed to Gacaca. This limits our ability to state conclusively that the observed effects were attributable to participation in the Gacaca rather than the mere passage of time, for example. In addition, while our first investigation shows that Durkheim's model can be applied to collective rituals that involve participants from distinct groups (i.e., victims and perpetrators) rather than a single social category, we also wanted to delve deeper into the processes that may occur in collective rituals that are framed by an intergroup context. In our second investigation, data were collected on large samples between February and April 2006 in four of the five Rwandan provinces (Rimé, Kanyangara, Yzerbyt, & Paez, 2011). Victims and perpetrators belonged either to an experimental or to a control group. In contrast to experimental participants, control participants came from a neighborhood where no Gacaca trial had yet taken place and where no such trial was being planned within the next year. Also, control participants had not taken part in any other Gacaca trial outside of their neighborhood. Both experimental and control participants responded twice, once before and once after the Gacaca trial that took place for the experimental participants. The two sets of ratings were collected within a period of 10 weeks. In total, 755 persons took part in the study. The experimental group comprised 384 participants of whom 200 were victims and 184 were perpetrators. The control group involved 371 participants of whom 195 were victims and 176 were perpetrators.

Measurements included in this second study intended (1) to verify previously observed emotional arousal and social integration effects of Gacaca in reference to appropriate control data and (2) to further explore the applicability of Durkheim's model to an intergroup context. Our examination of this second issue was guided by Nadler and Shnabel's (2008) needs-based model of reconciliation (see Shnabel & Noor, this volume). Briefly, this theory predicts that the experience of conflict results in distinct needs among victims and perpetrators. On

the one side, victims, having been helpless targets of violence, now suffer a threat to their identity as powerful actors in the community. On the other side, perpetrators, who formerly were powerful actors, suffer a threat to their moral identity. Consequently, in a process of reconciliation, victims need to receive messages of empowerment and to recover some level of control whereas perpetrators need to receive messages of social acceptance and to regain a positive image of themselves (Nadler & Liviatan, 2006). Perpetrators' apologies contribute to this dynamic: "By apologizing, you take the shame of your offense and redirect it to yourself" (Lazare, 2004, p. 52).

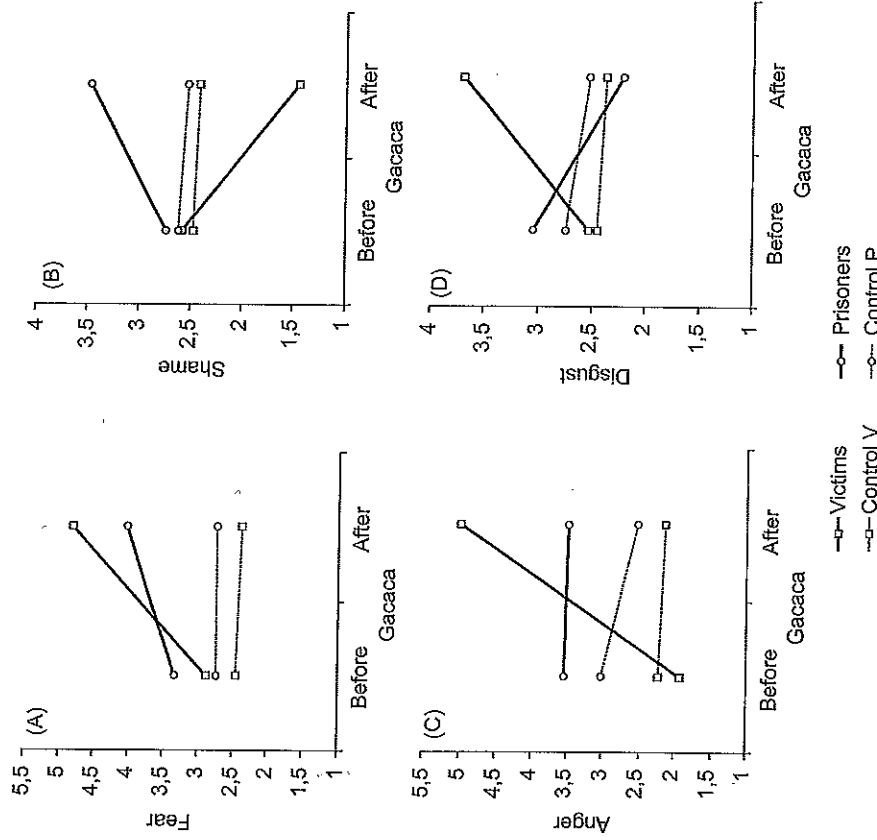
Along these lines, we expected Gacaca to induce the exchange of complementary emotions, consistent with the needs-based model. In our measurements, we therefore distinguished between a variety of basic emotions (Scherer & Tran, 2001), including (1) resignation emotions (i.e., sadness, fear, and anxiety), (2) moral emotions (e.g., shame) and (3) hostile emotions (i.e., anger and disgust). We first predicted that participation in Gacaca would enhance resignation emotions in both victims and prisoners, whereas no change was expected among control respondents. Second, we expected an exchange in levels of shame between victims and prisoners: participation in Gacaca would reduce shame among victims and enhance it among perpetrators. Third, as hostile emotions (anger and disgust) are strongly felt and expressed by persons who hold power (Keltner & Lerner, 2010), we predicted that the exchange of power resulting from participation would boost anger and disgust among victims and reduce them among perpetrators.

In addition to these emotional variables, social variables similar to those used in the first study were also included in this second one. They comprised ratings of (1) positive emotional climate, an emotional index which also reflects social cohesion, (2) positive stereotypes about the outgroup (which is the reverse of the variable used in the first study), (3) perceptions of outgroup homogeneity (as assessed in the first study), and (4) ingroup self-categorization, which provides a negative index of social integration.

## Second Investigation: Findings and Comments

With respect to emotional effects of participation in Gacaca, our findings fully supported the predictions of the model. Both victims and perpetrators who participated in the Gacaca manifested a considerable increase in all three "resignation" emotions (fear, sadness, and

anxiety) in the period which followed their participation (see Figure 10.1A). These findings are in perfect agreement with the rare pieces of empirical evidence about consequences of Truth and Reconciliation procedures (Brounéus, 2008; Byrne, 2004; Kaminer et al., 2001).



**Figure 10.1** Level of basic emotions before and after Gacaca among victims who took part in Gacaca ( $N = 200$ ), control victims ( $N = 184$ ), prisoners who participated in Gacaca ( $N = 195$ ), and control prisoners ( $N = 176$ ). A illustrates the reactivation of "resignation" emotions (fear, sadness, anxiety) ensuing from participation. B depicts the exchange of shame among victims and prisoners after Gacaca. In C and D, the increase in victims' level of hostile emotions (anger, disgust) after Gacaca reveals their empowerment resulting from the collective process. In addition, D shows that prisoners have moved in the opposite direction. The stability of figures for the control groups ensures the validity of observed changes among Gacaca participants. Rimé et al., 2011.

Scarce as it is, the available research unanimously points to a surge of negative emotions among victims and/or witnesses after their participation. The unanimous view thus runs against a "cathartic" or discharge perspective of the expression of emotion in social context. It therefore seems untrue that the mere expression of emotions in a collective situation has straightforward healing effects. This message is also consistent with the findings emerging from the research on the emotional expression between individuals (Kennedy-Moore & Watson, 1999; Rimé, 2009).

At the same time, the emotional effects from Gacaca nicely supported predictions from the complementary needs models of reconciliation (Lazare, 2004; Nadler & Liviatan, 2006; Nadler & Shnabel, 2008). Consistent with a view of Gacaca as an apologetic and restorative justice ritual, shame decreased among victims who participated. It thus appeared that participation helped to restore their self-esteem and dignity. Among perpetrators, as predicted, participation in Gacaca resulted in an increase of shame, an effect likely to reflect their internalization of social control (see Figure 10.1B). Finally, the empowerment of victims by participation in Gacaca was evidenced by their heightened level of hostile emotions (disgust, anger), with a particularly dramatic increase in anger (Figure 10.1C and D). Among perpetrators, there was also a reduction of levels of hostile emotions, particularly disgust, suggesting that perpetrators had moved symbolically in the opposite direction (Figure 10.1D).

The results from our psychosocial variables supported the view that participation in the Gacaca ritual enhanced the social cohesion of these two groups which in the past had been opposed to one another in the most dramatic manner. After participation, the improvement in intergroup relationship was manifested for both groups in a reliable manner across three of the four indicators included in the study. First, participation in Gacaca was found to strengthen participants' self-definition in "non-ethnic" terms. These results suggest that rituals involving collective emotional expressions and the recognition of past collective misdeeds can contribute to the relaxing of intergroup boundaries and distinctions (e.g., those based on ethnic divides). Second, in line with Durkheim's insights and congruent with the decategorization and direct contact model of prejudice reduction (Pettigrew, 1998), participation in Gacaca favored a personalization or individuated perception of members of the outgroup. Perceiving the outgroup as being homogeneous amounts to denying individual and personal characteristics to outgroup members and reduces them to a mere instantiation of their category, thus sustaining prejudice and hostile social relations. Third,

among both victims and prisoners, participants generally expressed more positive stereotypes of outgroup members during the second wave of data collection. This confirmed that an important ingredient of intergroup reconciliation and a supposed effect of restorative and expiation rituals is a change in stereotypes.

Finally, Durkheim's model led us to expect that the emotional climate would be perceived as more positive and involving more cohesion after the Gacaca than before. This hypothesis was supported for perpetrators but not for victims. It is likely that by the end of the trial, the cost of participation appeared much lighter for perpetrators than for victims. For perpetrators, these trials meant the end of a long state of uncertainty about their fate as well as their possible reintegration in the community (Kanyangara et al., 2007; Mullet, Nann, Kadima Kandiangandu, Neto, & Pinto, 2010; Staub, Pearlman, & Miller, 2003). Among victims, prior to Gacaca participants rated the emotional climate more positively than controls, presumably because of their positive expectations. After Gacaca, this gap between participants and controls remained, but was reduced. Confrontation with perpetrators very likely triggered reliving past traumas and victims' initial expectations might have exceeded what the experience actually provided (Staub et al., 2003). At the same time, despite the decrease, the emotional climate continued to be seen as more positive among victim participants than among their controls, suggesting that the hopes instigated among victims before Gacaca did not entirely vanish with the trial.

## Conclusion

The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission popularized an idealistic view of transitional justice procedures as being capable of healing individual wounds and facilitating national reconciliation. But do Truth and Reconciliation really have such healing power? As is generally the case, the empirical studies described in this chapter bring complex answers to this simple question. First of all, the results of our two investigations clearly run against a "cathartic" or discharge perspective of the expression of emotion in social context. Simply talking out emotions and past sufferings in a collective situation does not ameliorate the expressed emotions and sufferings. Instead, as expected by Durkheim's model, participation in Gacaca systematically provoked and renewed feelings of sadness, anger, and fear among participants of both sides. However, a careful observation of participants' responses

manifested further emotional changes in a direction that differed according to participants' groups, thus revealing that the collective confrontational process did not simply result in an indiscriminate enhancement of negative feelings.

On the one hand, as predicted by the complementary needs models of reconciliation, shame decreased among victims and increased among prisoners. These results suggested that a restoration of self-esteem and dignity occurred in the former, whereas an internalization of social control happened in the latter. On the other hand, consistent with the view that a reconciliation of victims and perpetrator should also involve a symbolic exchange in power, Gacaca was found to have induced a heightened level of hostile emotions among victims, whereas a trend in the opposite direction was evidenced for prisoners. Such findings suggest that the Truth and Reconciliation procedure yielded an empowerment of victims and a corresponding reduction of power among perpetrators. Together, these results highlight the important dynamic consequences of Gacaca for the emotional feelings of the two parties involved.

According to Bloomfield (2003), Truth and Reconciliation procedures are not expected to provide reconciliation as such. Rather, they provide a series of ingredients that pave the way to reconciliation. This is exactly what can be expected from the complementary changes in emotional feelings observed in our second study among victims and prisoners as a result of their participation in the Gacaca process. Bloomfield added that a crucial element toward reconciliation lies in whether participants in the procedure question the attitudes and negative stereotypes that were developed about "the enemy" during the conflict. The results of the studies described in this chapter offered evidence that such preconditions to successful reconciliation were met in the Gacaca process. It was consistently observed that participation in Gacaca reduced negative stereotypes about the outgroup, enhanced positive stereotypes about them, strengthened participants' self-definition in non-ethnic terms, and favored an individuated perception of members of the outgroup. Thus, although it is important to be mindful of the risks entailed in reactivating negative emotions, our findings also show that Gacaca can bring about positive changes that may lay the foundations for a process of reconciliation in Rwanda.

A final question also arises as to whether the positive effects observed among the Gacaca participants are likely to extend to the Rwandese society as a whole. Data from a survey of 3700 South Africans conducted by Gibson (2004) suggest a positive answer. The survey provided empirical evidence that the Truth and Reconciliation

Commission's "truth" was fairly widely accepted by South Africans of all races, that some degree of reconciliation characterizes South Africa today, and that the collective memory produced by the TRC process did indeed contribute to reconciliation. Thus, in spite of the cost that transitional justice rituals incur in terms of negative emotions and perceived social climate for participants, they do seem to pave the way to social integration and to intergroup reconciliation. The findings of Gibson's large-scale survey conducted in South Africa are consistent with the results obtained from the present quasi-experimental research conducted in Rwanda. It will be the role of future studies to determine how far emotions and attitudes of members of the two parties directly involved in Gacaca reflect broader societal evolutions and how far their social interactions reflect some degree of actual reconciliation.

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