TESTIMONIES OF SUFFERING AND RECASTING THE MEANINGS OF MEMORIES OF VIOLENCE IN POST-WAR MOZAMBIQUE

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Introduction

This chapter explores the role that testimonies can play in helping survivors to come to terms with painful memories of the violence of the civil war (1976–1992) in Gorongosa, a district of the Sofala province, located in the centre of Mozambique. Gorongosa district is a former war zone where the majority of the people survived the war while remaining in their home area. At the end of the war, many survivors wished to forget the horrors they had undergone and focus on the task of repairing their lives. However, intrusive wartime recollections often disturbed post-war recovery processes. Given the local importance of narrative to give meaning to past experiences in Gorongosa, I engaged in conversations, in partnership with a Dutch-based mental health centre (Centrum ’45), with war survivors in order to determine whether the testimony method could help them deal with their painful wartime memories. War survivors accepted the offer and I selected and trained two assistants, one male and one female who worked as translators from the local language into Portuguese. The testimony sessions were performed in secluded spaces within the yards of the witnesses’ own houses.

The process of testimony-gathering and testimony-giving created alternative social spaces vis-à-vis the endogenous social spaces where other healing interventions take place. The survivors’ positive reaction to participation in this study is perhaps related to the fact that this was a pioneering study in a region in which research until now had been confined to the main urban centres. An outsider intervention of this nature carried out only five years after the end of the civil war conveyed the idea to survivors that it was important to share their wartime experiences. Moreover by triggering the return and valorisation of the personal experiences of war, the act of giving an account of oneself and being listened to became a subtle form of self-empowerment for the witnesses.
The testimonies were collected in Gorongosa during the months of June to November of 1998. A partial presentation of the results of this project took the shape of a description of quantitative results and focused on the psychotherapeutic role of the testimony method to ameliorate symptoms of post-traumatic stress (Igreja et al. 2004). Hitherto the qualitative results have not been analyzed. Moreover, as my research association with the area has been long-term (1997–2009), I have continued to meet and to talk with many of those who participated in the testimony-giving project of 1998. Many of the contextual aspects that I include in this chapter, therefore, derive from these long-term conversations with war survivors and the post-war generation in Gorongosa and elsewhere in the centre of Mozambique.

My argument here is that a careful reading of the content of the testimonies I collected shows that witnesses in this study appropriated the testimony method and used it in ways that allowed them to recast their upsetting wartime memories. This means that assisting trauma survivors to build a narrative of the traumatic events helped them to provide a framework for the memories of sad events. This framework was developed in a way that was conducive to exploring meaningful aspects of the multiple positions they assumed during the civil war and their identity as survivors and members of a specific culture. In order to grasp the complexities of the language used during the testimonies and then to highlight some of the socio-cultural specificities of the testimonies I studied, I traced back the genealogy of the testimony method as it was developed, particularly after World War II, in the context of court proceedings and therapeutic practices. In my analysis of the testimonies I also drew on a set of theoretical ideas on different “forms of talk” (Goffman 1981), particularly on ideas about the “intersection of spheres of discourses” (Ricoeur 1977), the “ethics of verbal transactions” (Smith 1975), and the performativity of words (Austin 1975; Geurts 2006; Riley 2005), about which more below. By showing the relevance of the historical matrices and analyzing both different forms of talk and changing subject-positions, I will show that the testimony intervention adds an important resource to deal with the painful memories of the war.

In this chapter, I will first briefly trace the development of the testimony method and its psychotherapeutic applications as a way of gaining insights into the meaningfulness of the war survivors’ testimonies presented in this study. I will then analyze how narration or talking can facilitate creativity and resilience – both significant concepts in