

Beyond Bullets – Internalising the values of Liberation

During the period of Rwanda's 26th anniversary commemoration of its liberation, I spared some time to share a coffee with a few friends. Among other fascinating subjects that came in the discussions about the liberation journey, there were individual and collective stories, most of which are little known to the general public. At times they are told, but from different perspectives and with different sensibilities: sometimes with painful tears and oftentimes with great pride. It is how they consolidate and transmit memory. The consolidation and transmission of memory is oftentimes a function of the education system; however, even when the education system isn't playing this natural role, society must somehow find how to transmit memory, which is essential in determining which value system is distinguishable and which is despised. It is how to give substance to the liberation because underpinning the armed war is the struggle of which value system should prevail.

I suspect that if the liberation journey provoked so much admiration for Rwandans, it is because the violence that it involved could not tarnish its beauty. A beauty that resides, among other things, as much as in the justness of the cause defended by the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) as in the idea of individual sacrifice carried by its known and unknown heroes. A beauty of ideas that not only ensured triumph at the battlefield, but – more importantly – the kind that protected gains beyond the military campaign that propelled the liberation to power. This idea of sacrifice was encapsulated in the words of Honorable Tito Rutaremara: "Liberation is not about what you get as an individual after liberation; it is about what the people get after liberation".

What they get is the liberation's value system. Thus, these men and women who decided to fight—knowing that death was the most likely outcome—so that others could live in freedom take our minds back to this deeply African conception of society: **“Individuals do not live for hundreds of years; communities do.”** In this sense, our individual choices and actions have an impact on other members of our community and on future generations. Likewise, the immortality that the liberation heroes acquire is not built on the temporary individual benefits they might have derived from the liberation struggle; immortality is forged in the collective memories of present and future generations, through the transmission of the values for which they fought.

Consequently, the transmission of values is the element without which liberation would be reduced to a simple and meaningless military victory, a footnote in the long history of the nation. Any deficiency in [the machinery supposed to transmit these values – the education system](#) – is reflected in the perception and attitudes that community members have towards the value system. [In other words, the inability for some to internalize the values of liberation is the gap between the present society and the much-desired-but-yet-to-materialize virtuous society.](#)

If the ideals of liberation were to be internalized, everyone's instincts towards the greater good for society would be evident. However, the struggle for accountability demonstrates that still existing confrontation where individual success is the dominant aspiration in the minds of some in leadership and, if truth be told, even in those of the ordinary citizens. Otherwise, it would be far easier to mobilise resources for the greater good that requires sacrifice on the part of individuals, which is the value system that transcends the liberation beyond an armed victory. If this basic understanding were to be internalized, then everyone would perceive the call of the value system as duty

rather than subordinate oneself to it due to fear of punishment. Indeed, sustainability of accountability is only possible when a natural inclination to the greater good and the shame that comes to its violation replace the fear of punishment that is identified to a particular enforcer.

As Confucius, the famous Chinese philosopher, put it: “if the people be led by laws, and uniformity sought to be given to them by punishments, they will try to avoid the punishment, but have no sense of shame. If they be led by virtue, and uniformity sought to be given them by the rules of propriety, they will have the sense of shame – and will become good.” This sense of shame is internalized duty, where punishment precedes the violation of the greater good instead of following it in the form of legalese (laws) and enforcement.

Therefore, the challenge for the liberation movement in its quest to create a virtuous society – absent of the desired education system – is to find more effective methods that render the transmission of its core values a priority that subsequently leads to this internalized duty.

Where the education system won't shape the value system of society, the actions and behaviors of leaders model society. It is from them that the ordinary person internalizes what is important and what should form the vision of their aspirations. Elsewhere, in addition to the education system, the arts, the media, the sports and entertainment industry, among others, are used for the transmission and consolidation of core values shared in common.



In Africa, each of these tools – even the education system – is dominated by a value system that promotes individual success. They operate against the ancestral value system of the Ubuntu philosophy which subordinates individual interests to collective interests and according to which a person exists only in relation to others. It is, therefore, not surprising that these tools produce individuals who do not accept to subordinate their interests to those of the community. When they do, it is not because of a natural inclination to the greater good; it is to avoid punishment.

At best, most of the individuals produced by the individualism now promoted in our societies will not be able to extend their vision of the community beyond close family and friends, if at all. At worst, their concerns and deeds will end with themselves. Further, their guidelines for individual choices will render them fundamentally incapable of espousing a vision of society that promotes a sense of sacrifice and deep respect for the greater good. Indeed, every functioning society subordinates individual aspirations to the greater good and demands that sacrifices are made in this quest.

Rwanda's liberation movement is significant because it dedicated itself to confronting the colonial patterns of thought and practice in the institutions of the state. It

could achieve much more if it had the support of the education system to consolidate and transmit memory. However, for its value system to get transmitted from one generation to another, the process of decolonization it started must be completed. For how long it will circumvent the education system to find solutions outside of it remains an open debate. What the next stage of the struggle entails is clear: how to get society – with leaders leading from the front and by example – to uphold the greater good as a natural instinct and call of duty rather than turning to the right thing due to the promptness of punishment. This is the least that society – young and old – can do to render the sacrifice of the known and unknown heroes, the giants on whose shoulders Rwanda stands arisen from the ashes of destruction. Only then will these heroes live eternally through collective memory so that the society they birthed stands on a firm ground – the value system they fought for.