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Transcript of an Audio-Recorded Conversation in Post-Conflict Rwanda

Participants:

- Mukakayange Veronique
- Muyisenge Onaan

Relation: Sister

Relation: Brother

Facilitator:

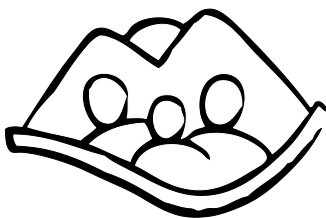
Date:

Recording Location:

Story Number: SFH0107

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Mukakayange Veronique & Muyisenge Onaan

Story Number: SFH0107

Onaan: My name is Muyisenge Onaan. I live in Kageyo Cell.

Veronique: My name is Mukakayange Veronique. This one is my relative, and we live together.

Onaan: Veronique, it's been a long time since we have seen each other and there are issues we have not talked about yet. You know that I take you as my relative and I feel free with you. There are some family issues I want to discuss. Many days have gone since our mother passed away, and during her life, even in our families, how we grew up together in our families, there is something I didn't understand. You know I trust you because we talk a lot, and I want you to tell me detailed explanations. Especially when the family loses the mother, children face a lot of problems. As you know, we tried to behave ourselves, and you know we trusted you. I have not come here for something else, it's because I trust you. As our elder there are some things you know that we don't know, and that's why I want you to tell me everything. I have hope.

Veronique: Thank you for asking me. It's a good question and it's a good chance for me because I was all along asking myself whether there is anybody who thinks about our family. You were still young and you know nothing about the history of our family, so I am grateful. So don't worry, I will tell you everything, starting with what you've asked me. You remember very well that our mother produced ten children but now there are only eight remaining. You know recently Donath died, and there was another one who was born before you and passed away at the age of two. I don't think you remember him for you didn't know him.

Onaan: I don't remember him.

Veronique: So there are eight remaining. The history of our family is very wide, but I will try to tell you everything and some of your questions will be answered. You know

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when you grew up our mother had already died. She fell sick and our father tried his best to take her to different hospitals, but she didn't recover. Our father was capable, for you know he was a teacher. He took her to Byumba hospital. We used to climb a high mountain to reach there. Then she was transferred to Kigali where she stayed in a place called Kacyiru. I heard there was someone there who could treat people and he could keep them for a long time. The death of our mother touched us because nobody was allowed to go there except the elders. Then when the war began, they threw a bomb in that hospital and our mother died there with the other patients. This is what I was told because I didn't have the real truth. You know we always wished that we could see someone who was living in that area who could explain to us about the death of our mother. It could help us. I think it is important to remind you about the death of our mother in the history of our family.

Onaan: It is very important.

Veronique: Growing up as orphans with only our father is not something unusual. It is normal, but because it affected us we should be concerned. So we remained with our father, and we faced a lot of problems. There is something you don't know that I want you to know. Our mother didn't have time to teach or advise us during her sickness. She never taught anything to any child, so growing up as an orphan, especially to lose a mother, is something hard and it hurts children. This means that we suffered because we lost a mother. A long time ago, I used to hear our neighbors say that our home is always clean. My mother liked working, she was a hard worker and through hard working she liked to learn. I remember our mother used to teach other women how to cook a balanced diet, there at the Catholic Church. She used to teach women from the village and make up cooperatives of cultivating. Actually, we missed a lot of her secret wisdom. Our mother was polite, clean, and powerful. She liked to educate children in good behaviors. Losing her was difficult for us, and we had to grow up in hardship.

After her death we became disorganized. Our father started teaching us how to fetch water, bathe, clean, sweep, and wash, but because we were not used to work, we faced many challenges. Our mother used to take care of the entire household. We changed and the hygiene at home decreased. What amazed me was the friends of our mother. Our aunts and uncles added a lot of energy to our home. They used to cut the tall grass in front of our home. Do you remember the other lady who was called Mukashira?

Onaan and Veronique: Mukashira and the Muguras.

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Veronique: They used to cut grass and do cleaning in the morning for you. You were still young, but I was grown up and I could understand. They felt pity towards us because our mother used to care for us. It's not that our father didn't love us, but he liked to pray a lot. He used to go to Uganda, Gahini, and Gatunda to attend crusades. In his travels, he feared that one day he would find us in bad state, and that's why he did something amazing. I want you to know that that's why he brought home our grandmother to be there for us.

Onaan: Grandmother? Ooh yes, I used to see her.

Veronique: Our Grandmother came to take the place of our parents. Our father did that because he was never at home. He was a man of God, he attended crusades, he was the chairperson of youth in the church, and he used to attend trainings and train others in Kigali, which could last for weeks. So, we would spend days eating badly, not bathing and not attending school. We would spend days in hardship without any advisor. So when our grandmother came, she did her best. So, according to the history of our family, things I remember that can be important for you to know is that our mother died of sickness. What you knew was that she was killed by the bomb.

Onaan: Yes, I only knew that she was killed by the bomb.

Veronique: Having this chance to meet here and talk is a blessing. Again, I want you to know that our grandmother came to live with us because our mother had died and our father was never at home. That's why she came, and she is the one we raised us.

Onaan: Why didn't our father re-marry? Is it because he was a man of God, or because we were many children, or just because he didn't want to?

Veronique: That is also a good question. In your character you are quiet, but if you had asked me that before I could have answered it. We only discuss other issues of our well-being and support each other, but I can also answer that question. Our father was a believer and it helped him a lot. He had ten children and although two of them passed away, eight children was not easy. Again, our father was clever and educated. I told you he was a teacher, so he was conscious and he used to watch other families which had step-mothers. You remember he used to give us example of Munyarubuga's family.

Onaan: Vicent.

Veronique: That family that lived in Kadago, do you remember the fights we used to find there when they sent us for something? They used to fight day and night, his wives were always fighting each other. You remember he married many women, and when

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one of them died he married another. Do you remember the last he married, the mother of Munyankindi? Do you remember the problem she had with older children? She used to fight with them and they could beat her no matter that she was the wife of their father. So our father used to see all those problems. I don't know whether it's because we bordered Uganda and Mutara where there is polygamy, but people in our area used to marry many women. But our father was educated and he said "I will not marry another woman who will hurt my children." He said "I will raise them alone because my kids will suffer more if I marry." I knew he was like that. He knew how we suffered in our childhood and he didn't want us to grow up in pain. He knew what we went through. So that's one of the reasons why he didn't marry.

Onaan: You mean our father prayed to protect us from problems?

Veronique: Not only did he pray but he was also faithful and he was a good example in our village. You know he was leading different things, like he was the chairperson in the tea cooperative in the church and he was a teacher. Being an advisor of many people also helped him to learn from their problems and he used this as a weapon of controlling his conscious. That's what I think according to how I saw it.

Onaan: You told us how our father used to travel to Uganda. How did you behave? Didn't you meet problems with the people who were coming home? Like violating girls or beating you since you were still young? Because father could be away for long time.

Veronique: He used to be gone for a long time and we could face problems. You have made me remember something. Even if it is not in this discussion, it is very sensitive and it grieves my heart. While he was away in Uganda, our neighbors had to be our guardians. They thought that we would misbehave just because there was nobody to control us. When our elder brothers Bosco and Afrika would send for us to bring something and we would meet people on the way, they could chase us back home with canes because they knew our father was not at home and then you would go back home crying. We also met problems because of our grandmother. Even though she raised us, she was mean to us. I think you know that.

Onaan: I knew that.

Veronique: We grew up in hardship. We were wealthy, you know we had cows, goats, sheep, and gardens where we cultivated different crops. But when the maize was ready, we were not allowed to eat it. I think you know that.

Onaan: I used to hear it was hard to get food from her.

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Veronique: We would go to harvest maize in our garden with our grandmother and carry it home in heavy bundles. Then she cooked all of it, but she would cut that cooked maize in half and only gave us that to eat.

Onaan: She would give you half even though you had enough?

Veronique: We were young and we didn't understand. We ate what we were given. We would eat those halves from Monday through Saturday.

Onaan: I hear you were not allowed to eat sweet bananas

Veronique: Yeah, that one you know because it is recent. We used to cut bananas and keep them in pits to be ready, and every child couldn't wait to eat sweet banana on that day. When they were ready to get them out of the pit where they were kept, grandmother would escort us with a stick from where we carried them up to where we would take them to control us from eating the sweet banana. When our father returned home, we would cry and tell him about all of the problems that we faced during his absence. That is what contributed to hindering him from getting married. Then he would please us by slaughtering a goat or a cock for us. You know we had many cocks and our father was friendly to everyone. You remember how neighbors used to bring him animals for slaughtering, cold porridge, bananas, and other foods. Our father had no problem sharing with neighbors. He would feed us well during his presence. He would teach us to bathe, to wash clothes, and he encouraged us to study. He was our first teacher who taught us to read. You know he was a primary one teacher. He used to teach us at home after classes. Do you remember that every child had his or her own blackboard?

Onaan: Yes, I remember.

Veronique: Even those blackboards are still at home. Although we grew up in those hardships, our father knew it and he would comfort us.

Onaan: It was not easy, our growth was challenging.

Veronique: Now that you are grown and have completed University, the fact that you still ask questions is something important.

Onaan: Yeah, very important. I used to hear that our mother was so quiet. Didn't you at least discuss with her some good things that can help us? Because Dinah, I don't know if she thinks I am still young, but she is also quiet. That's why I don't usually talk to her, but I talk a lot with you. Isn't there at least anything you used to discuss with her that can help us?

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Veronique: That question is good, but...

Onaan: Sorry. For example, like praying. I heard she had a choir, and you also used to teach us singing. You can see it helped us.

Veronique: That is also a good question. Our mother was very quiet and humble. Anybody in our village who needed advice would go to Genesty, that was her name.

Onaan: Yes, I know it.

Veronique: I recently heard Dinah say that she heard people say that name was for our mother. As I told you, our mother was quiet, so she could handle all types of people. She was humble and clean. All girls requested her to be their matron, and she would accept. You can see a lot of tablecloths and mats that girls gave her before their marriage. They used to go to her for advice. My mother loved people and they loved her too. She had a lot of talents and I think I inherited some. She used to have long-lasting friendships and that was because of her character. She could keep people's secrets. That's why I wanted to laugh when you asked me why Dinah is polite. Some people cry when they see her, and that is because she reminds them of our mother, because she resembles her in appearance and in character.

Onaan: But our mother was big and strong.

Veronique: Yes, she was big and strong. Even our father respected her for that, not because she was stronger than him, but because of her physical fitness. Other characteristics of my mother are that she was polite, humble, and she respected our father. She respected not only outside people but us as well. She also used to tell us proverbs and stories. Although she didn't give us advice, she used to send me to visit my grandmother. But all of us used to fear going there. My mother was lucky to be married in a Christian family, because her family believed in witches. But I used to go there and my grandmother taught me a lot of the stories that I used to tell you. Our parents liked stories but the generation of today does not listen to stories because of time. Even if I tell you about story telling you can't understand unless I tell it. So you'll have to visit me again.

Onaan: I will visit you again and listen to them in belief.

Facilitator: You talked of what you passed through after your mother's death and how you were left with your father, who was also not there for you. You lived a hard life but you kept your good behaviors. How did you get the courage to live and grow up to be responsible people without turning into street kids or practicing bad behaviors?

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Veronique: There is not any secret other than respect. Our father was strict. You could ask for permission of two days, but if you exceed only one day then you would get a serious punishment. We feared going into people's homes because our father didn't like it, so we never had other outside behaviors. Also, after the death of my mother, I heard a whispering voice which told me to behave. Because I had no mother, I had to be the best example of girls who grow up without their mothers. Again, the friends of my mother were always near to teach us what we didn't know. They taught us how to weave and make mats and they would follow up to see whether we completed what we were taught. Our Aunt used to send us her first daughter to teach us the work of girls and behaviors and discuss with us what we didn't know. Our mothers' friends were always near advising us to behave. Ester from Bisangwa family sent me her first daughter Nyirasafari to come and discuss with us, so there was no other secret other than our family friends. Our father used to invite people for sharing, during Christmas and new year he used to invite people, and then all of us would play the drums which he made for us. There was our neighbor called Muhunde. Our father would cheer us up by playing drums. They used to come from a far distance thinking there is a party and people could go back happy. So, even during his absence his friends and my mother's friends were there for us. I think it's those pieces of advice that helped us, and kept us up to upper classes, even though I don't have a mother. So I think the strength came from how our father kept us close and the advice from family friends.

Facilitator: I want you to tell your brother and the other generation how you kept welcoming your father while actually he was not there to give you parental love. Why did you keep loving him even though you didn't see him when you needed him?

Veronique: We used to be annoyed with our father while he was away, especially when we slept with hunger. But he was close, and he had taught us to share our problems with him. He understood and would ask for forgiveness when we complained. He would reason with us, and I think spending his time in God's work kept him from getting married which could have hurt us more. Above all, he was the only parent we had. So, we loved him. Another good thing was that he taught us how to sing. We would compose songs and go to sing from Remera in Kigali. We had a church choir. Whenever he came back with visitors, we sang for him songs of depression. When he found us hurt he would always look for something to please us, like giving us new clothes and shoes, and that's how we kept loving him. Even up to today we talk about it because our father is still alive. He was supposed to come but unfortunately he is sick. I don't know whether all the points I have given you are sound.

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Onaan: Yeah, they are sound. I want to ask you another question about our grandmother's death. I heard she died when she was alone. Do you have any news, for up to now I have no news, about how she was buried?

Veronique: You didn't ask anybody?

Onaan: No, I didn't ask.

Veronique: You remember they told us about her death while we were together, but I went ahead and inquired how she died. However much she mistreated us, I think now it was a misunderstanding and I have forgiven her. I went to look for Patricia. It's not been a long time, only two months have passed, and there was a wedding so I said I will ask her. I had got the training from Stories For Hope. So I asked that lady.

Onaan: Were they living together?

Veronique: No, she went to live with Joel, her first born. You remember we were separated by war. It started when you were at school at St Andree. I was also studying at Remera Rukomo and our father had to hide because he was hunted. So our grandmother was left alone and she went to Joel, her first born. So, she lived with them. Among our relatives, you remember that apart from raising cows they were not wealthy. When my grandmother reached there she had no care and she started to be sick because she had nobody to give her water. I asked her why her last born Karinganire didn't give her care, and they told me he was working in tea gardens and Patricia was hiding from war. She became so sick, but when she sent a message to her youngest son to give him her last words, they refused him permission. Patricia also waited to go with Karinganire. Then she died from Joel's home and was buried by neighbors. They buried her in sheets while hiding. When they were coming from burying her, they met her son and Patricia and they gave them news about her sickness and death. That's all they told me and that's the same death our grandfather died while we were refugees. They both died the same death and were given the same burial even though they died in different places. That's the real story of which you will also tell our younger generation.

Onaan: Again, many people used to come home. Some were god-children of our parents and others were family friends, but our relatives did not come. Why was that? Why didn't they live with us or help us to do work as other people not related to us were doing? Instead, they would come only for parties; they would eat, drink, and go away. Why didn't our relatives show us love? They never cared for us and instead other people not related to us were helping us.

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Veronique: When I grew up, I compared a relative with a good neighbor. There is a proverb in Kinyarwanda which says "A good neighbor is better than a distant relative". You know our grandfather married two wives. He produced fifteen children with Prosekira and he produced nine children with our grandmother but all of them were boys so we had no aunt. The other wife produced many girls. They are also your aunts but from another wife. However, they love us and give us advice as you are well aware.

Facilitator: There is a question he asked you. He said "why didn't our relatives care about us like the way other people not related to us did?"

Veronique: Yes, I was still explaining it to him. Although we had our uncles and aunts, they were always jealous of us. Most of time they demanded their inheritance, forcing our grandfather to give them their share while he was still alive. That's because they were many. Otherwise, other people who used to come home were welcome, and they maintained that relationship. Our home welcomed everyone who came there. Remember the schoolmates that we used to bring home. I think we inherited it from our mother. But not all of them were negative. You remember we had a good uncle.

Facilitator: I have another question I can ask. You said your mother came from a pagan family while your father came from a Christian family. How did it become possible for them to live together happily while they had different beliefs?

Veronique: The foundation of everything is love and discussing matters together. My father used to talk with my mother before her sickness. They would sit together and discuss a lot of their issues together. What I know is that my father asked my mother to forget her beliefs in order to build a good family and have children with good behaviors. He told her how he was a Christian, and that her beliefs had a bad ending, so my mother accepted and joined my father and started to go to church. Her family abandoned her but I heard most of them had a terrible death. Remember we used to fear greeting our uncles because we feared their demons. We would walk away from them. It's only nowadays we can greet them because some of them dropped those beliefs. So I think they managed to live together because they would have time to talk about their problems together. So, what I believe is that the love they had for each other made my mother be brave and drop her beliefs.

Onaan: I usually find many children and orphans at your house. Do you get time to talk with them and encourage them to fight for their future?

Veronique: There is something I usually do. Even you know because you sent Nancy to come and visit me during the holidays. My brothers send me their children to learn

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good behaviors from me. On this Christmas, I had thirty children at my house. So I have many children at my house every holiday. What I do is separate the boys from the girls and talk with them separately. I talk with the girls about what concerns them and do the same with the boys. Later I bring them together in the sitting room and we have a general discussion, then I buy them biscuits and we watch films of their age. None of them want to go back to their homes.

Facilitator: I want to ask you where you got the talent of tolerating that number of children, having time to advise them, and encouraging them to love life and look forward for the future. Where do you get that strength?

Veronique: For me, I like that generation. I remember one of my sisters told me that I do things for the future. During my trainings in school, I used to go to groups of old people and ask their advice. I thought of how I grew up without parents and how other people guided us. I always ask you to support things that unite us other than those that separate us. I promised myself that I would make children satisfied and learn to create a situation that is convenient for them. Because we grew up with hunger, our father would slaughter a goat for us and start a journey the next day. I don't want our children to face the same things we went through.

Facilitator: You said that you tell your brother to support things that unite you and leave things that separate you. Why do you do so?

Veronique: When I recall how our relatives lived, they minded the world. Again if I look back on war, some people had tribalism, others stole things, and nothing good came out of it. These ones are my brothers and sisters. I sometimes see people from the same parents have misunderstandings and I feel bad about it. What I always wish is to have a union in our family which will guide our children in the future. Then if I talk about our country, it no longer tolerates hatred in our society. In order to build a better country, we have to do it ourselves without waiting for outside people to do it for us. If we build in our children the habit of solving problems between themselves without inviting outsiders, it will assist them. That's why I say we support love, peace, and unity in our people. In our family, we are many. I told you we are eight and all of us have children. If we gather them together and visit our father to ask different questions, I think it can build us more. So, there is no strength apart from what I went through, and what I learned from school which helps me to discuss things with children. In short, I am happy that you thought to have this discussion with me. Even if I have not answered all your questions, we will keep on talking and add more.

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Onaan: Thank you for giving me your time during which you could be doing your own things to have this discussion. Even if we haven't completed everything, we will have time for more discussions.

Veronique: Thank you too. Some people invite their aunts to such discussions but I am happy that you thought about me as your sister and gave me that trust. I will keep it and we will continue to have more discussions.

Onaan: I thank you all very much.

