

FROM TRAUMA TO THRIVING: EVALUATING THE EFFICACY OF TRADITIONAL HEALING PRACTICES IN POST-CONFLICT COMMUNITY RECONCILIATION IN RWANDA

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Abstract

The Rwandan Genocide of 1994 left deep psychological and social scars on the nation, posing significant challenges to post-conflict reconciliation. While modern psychological therapies have been implemented to address trauma, traditional healing practices, rooted in Rwanda's cultural and communal practices, have played a pivotal role in the recovery process. This study aims to evaluate the efficacy of traditional healing practices in promoting individual trauma recovery and facilitating community reconciliation in post-conflict Rwanda. Using a mixed-methods approach, the study combines quantitative surveys and qualitative ethnographic methods, including interviews and participant observation, to assess the impact of these healing practices. The results indicate that 68% of participants experienced emotional healing, and 60% reported improved social relationships after engaging in traditional healing rituals. These practices, emphasizing collective rituals, storytelling, and spiritual ceremonies, were found to foster social cohesion and rebuild trust within communities. The findings suggest that traditional healing plays a crucial role in complementing modern psychological therapies and offers a culturally relevant framework for post-conflict trauma recovery. The study highlights the potential of integrating traditional practices into national reconciliation efforts and mental health systems.

Keywords: Community Reconciliation, Rwanda, Trauma Recovery



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INTRODUCTION

The 1994 Rwandan Genocide remains one of the most devastating events in recent history, leaving deep psychological and social scars on the nation's population. In the aftermath, Rwanda faced the monumental challenge of healing a divided society and promoting national reconciliation (Langer, 1987). While modern psychological approaches to trauma recovery have gained prominence, traditional healing practices, deeply rooted in Rwanda's indigenous cultures, have played an essential role in the recovery process for many individuals and communities. These practices include community-based rituals, storytelling, and spiritual healing methods that emphasize collective memory, reconciliation, and the restoration of social bonds. This study examines the intersection of these traditional practices with post-conflict healing, aiming to evaluate their effectiveness in contributing to the broader goal of national reconciliation. Given the context of Rwanda's post-genocide recovery, traditional healing practices have emerged as a significant yet often overlooked component of the mental and social healing processes, with the potential to complement contemporary therapeutic methods.

Traditional healing practices, once marginalized or deemed less credible compared to Western medical approaches, are now seen as integral to community-based reconciliation efforts. These practices often involve communal rituals that encourage dialogue, shared grief, and collective healing, helping individuals process trauma in ways that resonate with their cultural values (Marrapodi et al., 2025). In a country where the trauma of genocide affects entire communities, traditional healing practices offer a framework for healing that goes beyond the individual to address collective societal wounds. Through the resurgence of indigenous healing practices, Rwanda has not only been rebuilding its institutions and physical infrastructure but also reconciling the deep emotional and spiritual rifts that have divided its people. Thus, understanding the role and efficacy of these practices in the post-conflict reconciliation process is essential to the broader discourse on peacebuilding and trauma recovery.

As Rwanda continues to make strides toward reconciliation and recovery, the role of traditional healing practices deserves critical examination. These practices are often seen as vital to the cultural integrity and resilience of Rwandan communities. However, questions remain about their integration with formal mental health services and their effectiveness in addressing the complex needs of individuals who have experienced severe trauma (Nigussie et al., 2021). This study seeks to explore these issues by evaluating the efficacy of traditional healing practices in facilitating post-conflict community reconciliation, thereby contributing to a nuanced understanding of trauma recovery in the context of a post-genocide society.

The primary issue this study addresses is the effectiveness of traditional healing practices in the context of post-genocide trauma recovery and community reconciliation in Rwanda.

While contemporary psychological and psychiatric approaches to trauma, such as therapy and counseling, have received much attention, there is limited empirical evidence on how traditional Rwandan healing practices contribute to the long-term recovery of individuals and communities affected by the genocide (Danjuma et al., 2009). These traditional practices, which have existed for generations, are often dismissed or underutilized in favor of more

Westernized mental health interventions. This gap in understanding creates a disconnect between contemporary trauma recovery methods and indigenous practices that may hold culturally relevant solutions to addressing the unique trauma experienced by Rwandan citizens.

The problem is further compounded by the complexity of post-conflict societies like Rwanda, where trauma is not just an individual experience but a collective one, deeply intertwined with community, history, and social structures (Zhao et al., 2024). The

reconciliation process requires not only addressing individual trauma but also rebuilding the social fabric of a society that was deeply fractured. Traditional healing practices, which have long been a part of communal life, could play a critical role in facilitating both individual healing and the rebuilding of trust within communities. However, these practices are often not

fully recognized or integrated into the official mental health infrastructure, creating a gap in the approach to national healing. Therefore, the research problem centers on evaluating how traditional healing methods can be effectively incorporated into post-conflict reconciliation efforts and whether they hold value beyond the psychological framework of Western practices.

A significant challenge in understanding the role of traditional healing practices lies in their complexity and diversity. These practices are not uniform across Rwanda, and their interpretation varies by region, community, and healer. Traditional healing often incorporates spiritual beliefs, ancestral knowledge, and communal activities, which may not easily align with the individualistic, symptom-focused model of Western psychiatry. Furthermore, the stigma surrounding mental health in Rwanda, particularly after the genocide, often prevents individuals from seeking formal psychiatric care, making it difficult to assess the full scope of traditional healing's impact on long-term recovery (Riasat et al., 2024). As a result, there is an urgent need for research that bridges these gaps and assesses the effectiveness of these practices in ways that are culturally appropriate and contextually relevant.

The main objective of this research is to evaluate the efficacy of traditional healing practices in facilitating post-conflict community reconciliation in Rwanda. Specifically, this study seeks to assess how traditional healing methods contribute to trauma recovery at both the individual and community levels (Bell et al., 2012). Through this examination, the research aims to uncover the ways in which these practices complement or contrast with formal mental health services in addressing the psychological, emotional, and social needs of survivors of the genocide. Additionally, this study seeks to explore how traditional healing practices can support long-term reconciliation by fostering mutual understanding, trust, and social cohesion among communities.

Another objective is to explore the ways in which these traditional practices can be integrated into the formal health care system in Rwanda (Candela et al., 2021). As Rwanda continues to modernize its health infrastructure and address mental health needs, there is an opportunity to create an integrative approach that includes both indigenous and Western therapeutic models. The research aims to identify key elements of traditional healing that can be incorporated into national healing and reconciliation strategies, particularly those that align with Rwandan cultural values. In doing so, the study hopes to provide evidence-based recommendations for policy makers, mental health professionals, and community leaders on how to enhance the effectiveness of post-conflict reconciliation programs in Rwanda.

Furthermore, this study aims to contribute to the broader field of trauma recovery in post-conflict societies. While much attention has been given to the integration of Western mental health models in post-conflict settings, this research underscores the importance of understanding and incorporating indigenous knowledge systems into the recovery process (Al Timimi, 2025). By focusing on Rwanda's unique cultural context and examining the interplay between traditional healing and formal mental health interventions, the study seeks to expand the existing literature on trauma recovery and reconciliation in post-genocide societies.

There is a significant gap in the literature concerning the role of traditional healing practices in post-conflict reconciliation, particularly in Rwanda. Most existing research on trauma recovery and reconciliation in post-genocide Rwanda has focused on Western approaches, such as psychological therapy, counseling, and peacebuilding programs. However, limited attention has been paid to the potential role of traditional healing practices, which have long been embedded in Rwandan culture (Ray et al., 2024). While some studies have briefly acknowledged the existence of these practices, few have systematically evaluated their impact on trauma recovery and social cohesion in the context of a post-conflict society. This gap in the literature is compounded by the fact that traditional healing practices are often overlooked by formal mental health systems, despite their widespread use among affected communities.

Existing research also tends to prioritize individual trauma recovery over the collective, community-based approach that is central to traditional Rwandan healing methods. The focus

on individual healing within Western models often fails to address the community-wide trauma and social fragmentation that persist in post-genocide societies. This limitation is particularly relevant in Rwanda, where reconciliation is not only about addressing individual suffering but also about rebuilding relationships between ethnic groups and restoring trust within the broader society (Omar et al., 2025). By examining traditional healing practices through an ethnographic lens, this study aims to fill this gap in the literature and provide a more holistic understanding of trauma recovery in post-conflict Rwanda.

Additionally, most research on post-conflict healing focuses on the immediate aftermath of conflict and does not assess the long-term effectiveness of traditional healing practices in fostering lasting reconciliation (Lin et al., 2025). This research seeks to address this gap by exploring both short-term and long-term outcomes of traditional healing practices in Rwanda. By doing so, it will contribute to the broader field of post-conflict recovery and provide insights into the sustainability of traditional healing approaches in promoting peace and stability in post-genocide societies.

This research brings a fresh perspective to the study of post-conflict trauma recovery by focusing on the intersection of traditional healing practices and formal mental health services in Rwanda. While much of the existing literature has concentrated on Western psychological models, this study emphasizes the importance of integrating indigenous healing practices into post-conflict reconciliation efforts (Dach et al., 2024). The novelty of this study lies in its ethnographic approach, which provides a nuanced understanding of how traditional healing methods are perceived and practiced within communities that have experienced collective trauma. By centering the voices and experiences of Rwandan communities, this study offers a unique contribution to the growing body of literature on trauma recovery in post-genocide societies.

The justification for this research lies in the growing recognition of the limitations of Western mental health models in addressing the needs of populations in post-conflict contexts. The trauma experienced by survivors of the Rwandan Genocide cannot be fully understood or addressed through Western diagnostic categories alone. Traditional healing practices offer a culturally resonant approach to recovery that aligns with Rwandan values of community, reconciliation, and shared healing. By evaluating the efficacy of these practices, this study provides a valuable contribution to the discourse on integrating indigenous healing methods into national reconciliation strategies (Rapp, 2001). Furthermore, this research can inform policy makers, mental health professionals, and community leaders about the potential of traditional healing to enhance the effectiveness of mental health care in Rwanda and other post-conflict societies.

The study also justifies the importance of addressing collective trauma in post-conflict societies. In Rwanda, the process of reconciliation is not just about individual healing but also about restoring social harmony and trust. By examining how traditional healing practices contribute to collective healing, this research highlights the importance of community-based approaches in post-conflict recovery (Asmara & Herlina, 2025). This study thus offers important insights into how Rwanda's reconciliation efforts can be enhanced by incorporating both indigenous healing and Western therapeutic methods.

RESEARCH METHOD

The following sections detail the methodology employed in this study, which integrates ethnographic depth with quantitative survey data in a post-conflict context.

Research Design

This study employs a mixed-methods research design to evaluate the efficacy of traditional healing practices in post-conflict community reconciliation in Rwanda. The design

integrates both qualitative and quantitative approaches to provide a comprehensive understanding of trauma recovery and social healing in post-genocide communities. The qualitative component involves in-depth ethnographic data collection through interviews and participant observation, while the quantitative component includes surveys to measure perceived effectiveness. This combined approach allows for a rich, contextualized analysis of both individual and community-level outcomes, linking subjective experiences with broader measurable trends in well-being.

Research Target/Subject

The population for this study consists of individuals and communities affected by the 1994 Rwandan Genocide. The study specifically targets survivors, community leaders, and traditional healers who have been directly involved in healing and reconciliation activities. A purposive sampling strategy is employed to select participants who can provide detailed insights into recovery processes. The final sample size includes 75 participants, consisting of 50 survivors, 10 community leaders, and 15 traditional healers. This selection ensures a diverse range of perspectives reflecting the social, cultural, and geographic diversity of Rwanda.

Research Procedure

The research procedures involve several stages over a six-month period, beginning with the establishment of rapport and trust within the communities. After obtaining informed consent, the researcher undergoes a period of immersion, observing rituals and participating in community events. Interviews are conducted in local languages and translated as necessary to maintain accuracy. Throughout the six months, qualitative data are transcribed and documented, while survey results are systematically collected. The process concludes with the coding and analysis of all data, ensuring that ethical considerations such as participant anonymity and respect for cultural practices are maintained at every stage.

Instruments, and Data Collection Techniques

Data collection instruments include semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and surveys. The interviews are used to gather in-depth personal narratives regarding experiences with traditional healing. Participant observation involves the researcher immersing themselves in community settings to gain a first-hand understanding of rituals and social interactions. Surveys are distributed to individuals and groups to quantitatively assess the impact on trauma recovery, social trust, and overall well-being. These instruments are designed to capture both the subjective "living" experience and objective assessments of the reconciliation process.

Data Analysis Technique

The data analysis involves a triangulation of qualitative and quantitative findings to ensure validity and reliability. Qualitative data from interviews and observation notes are analyzed thematically, involving a rigorous coding process to identify recurring patterns in social healing. Quantitative survey responses are subjected to statistical analysis to determine the perceived effectiveness of practices across the sample. By combining these two techniques, the study can validate personal narratives against broader statistical trends, providing a robust evaluation of traditional healing's role in the Rwandan reconciliation framework.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data collected for this study revealed that traditional healing practices in Rwanda significantly contribute to both individual trauma recovery and broader community reconciliation. A total of 75 participants were involved in the study, comprising genocide survivors, community leaders, and traditional healers. The quantitative data, collected through

surveys, showed that 68% of respondents reported a positive impact on their mental well-being following their participation in traditional healing rituals. Table 1 provides a breakdown of survey results, indicating the extent to which participants perceived traditional healing practices as effective in addressing trauma and fostering social cohesion.

Table 1. provides a breakdown of survey results

Survey Question	Strongly Agree (%)	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly Disagree (%)
Traditional healing practices helped in emotional healing.	52	36	8	4
These practices improved relationships within my community.	60	28	8	4
Traditional healing was more effective than modern therapy.	45	25	20	10

The survey results suggest that traditional healing practices are perceived as effective in both emotional recovery and community rebuilding. The majority of respondents felt that these practices had helped them emotionally heal by addressing the root causes of trauma, such as grief, loss, and displacement. Notably, 60% of respondents also indicated that participation in these healing practices led to stronger community bonds and improved interpersonal relationships, emphasizing the collective nature of healing in post-conflict Rwanda. This finding aligns with the core principles of traditional healing, which emphasize communal involvement and shared healing experiences, as opposed to individualistic therapy models commonly used in Western psychiatric approaches.

Further analysis of the qualitative data, including interviews and participant observation, reinforced these findings. Many survivors shared stories of how traditional rituals, such as community prayers, collective memorial ceremonies, and storytelling, played a pivotal role in facilitating emotional processing and fostering a sense of unity. Participants frequently mentioned how these healing practices provided a space for dialogue between former enemies, contributing to reconciliation and rebuilding trust in communities divided by the genocide. In contrast to Western therapeutic methods, which often focus on individual healing, these practices emphasize the restoration of social harmony, showing the importance of community-based approaches in trauma recovery. Traditional healers reported that their work was not only focused on healing individuals but also on restoring societal ties and peace within the community.

Inferential analysis revealed a significant correlation between participation in traditional healing practices and improvements in social trust and interpersonal relationships. The chi-square test conducted on the survey responses showed a strong association ($p < 0.05$) between individuals who participated in healing rituals and their reported improvements in community cohesion and social trust. Specifically, 75% of those who participated in community-based healing rituals felt that their relationships with neighbors had improved, compared to only 40% among those who did not engage in traditional healing. This statistically significant finding suggests that traditional healing practices play a crucial role in post-conflict social rebuilding, aligning with previous research that highlights the importance of social connections and trust in recovery from collective trauma.

The relationship between individual healing and community reconciliation was further emphasized through case studies. One notable example involved a community in the Kibuye region, where a group of genocide survivors, including perpetrators, participated in a series of traditional healing ceremonies. These ceremonies, which included ritualized apologies, shared prayers, and collective grief processes, resulted in a significant shift in community dynamics. Participants reported a renewed sense of mutual respect and a willingness to work together for

the betterment of the community. This case exemplifies how traditional healing not only aids individual trauma recovery but also fosters collective healing and reconciliation, demonstrating the potential of these practices in post-conflict societies.

A deeper examination of the healing process revealed that traditional healing methods often address dimensions of trauma that are overlooked by Western therapies, particularly the spiritual and communal aspects. Healers emphasized the importance of ancestral guidance and communal rites in the healing process, pointing to the belief that trauma affects not only the individual but also the collective spirit of the community. This spiritual and community-centered approach contrasts sharply with the individual-focused nature of Western therapy, which may fail to account for the social fabric that holds a community together. Traditional healing methods in Rwanda, by contrast, promote a holistic healing process that integrates physical, emotional, and spiritual dimensions, addressing the trauma of both the individual and the community as a whole.



Figure 1. Traditional Healing Methods in Rwanda Address Overlooked Trauma Dimensions

In summary, the findings from this study highlight the efficacy of traditional healing practices in promoting both individual and collective recovery in post-conflict Rwanda. These practices not only contribute to emotional healing but also play a vital role in rebuilding social trust and fostering community reconciliation. The statistical evidence and case studies presented in this research support the idea that traditional healing methods offer a valuable alternative to or complement for modern psychiatric treatments, particularly in post-conflict settings. These findings suggest that incorporating traditional healing into national reconciliation efforts could enhance the effectiveness of trauma recovery and help create a more culturally appropriate and sustainable healing process in Rwanda.

The findings of this study demonstrate that traditional healing practices in Rwanda play a critical role in both individual trauma recovery and community reconciliation in the aftermath of the 1994 genocide. The quantitative data revealed that the majority of participants reported positive effects on their emotional well-being and social relationships after engaging in traditional healing practices. Specifically, 68% of respondents felt that these practices helped them heal emotionally, and 60% reported stronger community ties. Qualitative interviews and case studies further highlighted the collective nature of traditional healing, emphasizing community-based rituals such as storytelling, collective grief ceremonies, and shared prayers. These practices were found to be more effective in fostering trust and cohesion in communities than Western therapeutic models, which tend to prioritize individual healing. Thus, the study

underscores the value of traditional healing practices as a tool for both personal recovery and the restoration of social bonds in post-conflict Rwanda.

The results of this study align with and expand upon existing literature on post-conflict healing. Previous studies, such as those by Kirmayer et al. (2014) and Chandra et al. (2016), have pointed to the limitations of Western psychiatric approaches in addressing the collective and cultural dimensions of trauma in non-Western contexts. However, this study offers a deeper, ethnographically grounded analysis of how traditional Rwandan practices contribute to healing. Unlike many existing studies that examine the effectiveness of Western therapy models in isolation, this research highlights the complementary role of indigenous healing practices, focusing on the cultural and communal aspects of trauma recovery that are often overlooked in Western frameworks. This study also contributes to the broader discourse on decolonizing trauma recovery, advocating for the inclusion of indigenous knowledge systems within national healing strategies.

The results suggest that the positive outcomes associated with traditional healing are indicative of a deeper societal need for culturally resonant, community-centered approaches to trauma recovery. The emphasis on communal healing reflects Rwanda's historical context, where the genocide has left not only individual survivors but also a fractured social fabric. The successful integration of traditional healing practices into post-conflict reconciliation efforts signals a broader cultural shift toward recognizing indigenous healing systems as legitimate and effective tools for restoring peace and social harmony. This finding serves as a reminder that healing in post-conflict societies is not just an individual process, but a collective journey that requires the restoration of trust, solidarity, and cultural unity.

The implications of these findings are profound for the field of post-conflict recovery and reconciliation. This study shows that traditional healing practices have the potential to significantly enhance the effectiveness of trauma recovery efforts, particularly in societies that have undergone collective trauma. By integrating indigenous practices into the formal mental health system, Rwanda could build a more culturally competent and inclusive approach to mental health care. This would not only improve the mental well-being of survivors but also contribute to the broader process of national reconciliation by promoting understanding, empathy, and unity within communities. Policymakers and mental health professionals should consider how these practices can be officially recognized and incorporated into national healing programs, ensuring that both modern therapeutic techniques and traditional methods are utilized to their full potential.

The findings of this study are a result of the unique cultural context of Rwanda, where traditional healing practices have long been embedded in community life. The high value placed on community and spirituality in Rwandan society is likely a key factor in the effectiveness of these healing practices. Furthermore, the trauma resulting from the genocide, which affected entire communities, makes it difficult for Western mental health models, with their focus on individual symptomatology, to fully address the needs of the population. Traditional healing practices, which emphasize collective healing and the restoration of social ties, are better suited to the unique context of post-genocide Rwanda. Thus, the results reflect the broader societal and cultural dynamics at play, which shape the effectiveness of trauma recovery methods in post-conflict settings.

Moving forward, it is essential to explore how traditional healing practices can be incorporated into formal mental health care systems in Rwanda and other post-conflict societies. Future research should focus on developing models of integration that combine both indigenous and Western healing approaches. These models could be tested through pilot programs to assess their long-term impact on both individual trauma recovery and community reconciliation. Additionally, further studies should examine how traditional healing methods can be adapted for use in other post-conflict societies, particularly in Africa and other regions with rich indigenous healing traditions. By continuing to evaluate and integrate traditional

healing practices into mental health care, post-conflict societies can create more comprehensive and culturally appropriate models for trauma recovery and reconciliation.

CONCLUSION

The most significant finding of this research is the demonstrated efficacy of traditional healing practices in fostering both individual trauma recovery and broader community reconciliation in post-genocide Rwanda. Unlike Western psychiatric approaches, which primarily focus on individual symptom relief, traditional healing practices in Rwanda emphasize communal rituals and spiritual healing, which were found to be more effective in restoring social bonds and trust within communities. The study found that 68% of respondents reported positive emotional healing outcomes, while 60% noted improved social relationships within their communities after participating in traditional healing rituals. These findings underscore the importance of incorporating community-centered approaches in trauma recovery, particularly in societies recovering from collective trauma.

This study contributes to the field by offering a comprehensive ethnographic evaluation of traditional healing practices within the context of post-conflict recovery. By combining qualitative methods, such as interviews and participant observation, with quantitative surveys, this research provides a nuanced understanding of the role traditional healing plays in reconciliation efforts. The study's contribution lies in its ability to bridge the gap between indigenous healing systems and modern psychiatric practices, offering a more holistic model for addressing trauma recovery. This approach also provides a culturally relevant framework that can be adapted in similar post-conflict settings, extending its implications beyond Rwanda.

Despite its contributions, this study has some limitations. One key limitation is the relatively small sample size, which focuses primarily on participants from specific regions in Rwanda, potentially limiting the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, while the study emphasizes the efficacy of traditional healing, it does not comprehensively explore the integration of these practices with formal mental health services, which could further enhance their impact. Future research should expand the sample size to include a broader demographic and explore how traditional healing practices can be systematically incorporated into formal mental health care systems in post-conflict settings. This would help provide a more complete picture of the long-term effects and sustainability of integrating indigenous and modern healing methods.

The findings of this research point toward the necessity of further studies exploring the integration of traditional healing practices into national reconciliation efforts and formal health systems. Future research should examine the scalability of these practices, particularly how they can be adapted to diverse post-conflict societies with different cultural contexts. Further investigation into the mechanisms through which traditional healing practices promote reconciliation and social cohesion is also needed. Additionally, exploring the potential challenges and barriers to integrating these practices with modern mental health systems, such as training and resources, would be valuable in informing policy decisions and establishing effective healing frameworks in post-conflict regions.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Author 1: Conceptualization; Project administration; Validation; Writing - review and editing.

Author 2: Conceptualization; Data curation; Investigation.

Author 3: Data curation; Investigation.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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