

Public reconciliation at the South African TRC: the impact of the victim hearings

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ABSTRACT

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) has been a turning point in South African history. By listening to the experiences of apartheid victims and by considering applications for amnesty by apartheid perpetrators, the TRC embodied the entire transition to democracy. This article is based on a discursive analysis of the language created at the Human Rights Violations (HRV) hearings – the victim hearings – of the TRC. This was a language in which reconciliation and forgiveness were prominently present, hence the label ‘reconciliation discourse’. One of the key features of this reconciliation discourse was that the concept of reconciliation was interpreted in a highly inclusive way, leading to a set of multidimensional definitions. By referring to a number of testifying victims, I will demonstrate the multilayered interpretation of the term reconciliation at the HRV hearings. The testifiers were allowed to frame reconciliation in different ways, be it religious, political, cultural, or by referring to national unity. Additionally, victims were also allowed to be highly critical about reconciliation or to only conditionally accept the notion of reconciliation.

My central argument is that the TRC reconciliation discourse strengthened the willingness to reconcile among South African citizens (see Verdoolaege, 2008). One of the main reasons for this ‘maximalist’ perspective, according to my research, lies in the inclusive nature of the concept of reconciliation. This inclusive nature urged South Africans to accept reconciliation, to relate to the term reconciliation and to identify with this concept in many divergent ways. As a result of the discourse taking shape at the victim hearings, South Africans could now recognize themselves in one central and unifying concept. Consequently, as I will argue in the final part of this article, reconciliation became a central feature in post-TRC South Africa. At that time, the public debate on reconciliation was omnipresent and reconciliation-oriented initiatives were taking place all over the country. On a national level, this might have been favourable for the post-apartheid peace process in South Africa, and on an international level this led to reconciliation becoming an identifying label for South Africa as a whole.

The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission

The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission was called into existence in July 1995. The Preamble of the Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act No 34 of 1995 (the TRC Act) stated that the objectives of the TRC were to promote national unity and reconciliation, amongst others by establishing as complete a picture as possible of the gross violations of human rights which were committed under apartheid, by facilitating the granting of amnesty to apartheid perpetrators under certain conditions, and by providing recommendations to prevent future violations of human rights (TRC Report, 1998: 54). In order to achieve these ambitious tasks, three committees were put into place: the Committee on Human Rights Violations (HRVC), the Amnesty Committee and the Committee on Reparation and Rehabilitation.

The HRV Committee - which is the focus of this article - was in charge of collecting written victim statements and of organising the Human Rights Violations hearings, where a representative sample of victims was allowed to testify in public. The HRVC gathered close to 22,000 statements, covering 37,000 violations; this is more than any other previous truth commission had achieved (Graybill 2002: 8). These statements were recorded by trained statement takers who conducted interviews with victims of apartheid all over the country. Between April 1996 and June 1997 a little under 2000 of these victims told their stories before the HRV Committee. Over these 15 months 83 hearings took place in public places such as town halls, schools, churches and civic centres (TRC Report, 1998: 278).

The emphasis of the HRV hearings was on “the validation of the individual subjective experiences of people who had previously been silenced or voiceless” (TRC Report, 1998: 111). Supporters of the TRC claimed that to tell their stories of suffering and misery was a healing and cathartic experience for most of the victims. The mere fact that these survivors were allowed to talk about the past meant a lot to them; it showed that their experiences were officially acknowledged and this made them feel respected as human beings (see Picker, 2003: 20). Because of the impact it had on the victims and also because the media brought this Committee to the attention of the national and international public, the Human Rights Violations Committee has often been considered as one of the most successful components of the TRC.

Reconciliation discourse and the archive

The Human Rights Violations hearings provided a forum for thousands of apartheid victims to talk about the atrocities they had experienced under the apartheid regime – torture, rape, arson,

the murder or abduction of beloved ones. Based on a thorough reading of all of the Human Rights Violations testimonies, as available on the Official TRC Website (http://www.doj.gov.za/trc/trc_frameset.htm) and a discursive analysis of 30 of them, my research concluded that at these HRV hearings a specific kind of reconciliation discourse was constructed. This reconciliation discourse was created through interaction between the testifiers, the HRV commissioners and the audience, and it contained various specific features. The notion of reconciliation was a fundamental aspect of this discourse - for a detailed analysis I refer to Verdoolaege (2008). One of the central propositions of my research was that the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission should be regarded as a mechanism to produce power through discourse. This power should be regarded as constructive, hence exerting a positive impact on South African society, as we will see at the end of this article.

What I will illustrate here is the manner in which the concept of reconciliation was interpreted in a number of multidimensional ways before the HRV Committee. The fact that reconciliation was *allowed* to be regarded as a multilayered concept, with a wide variety of different definitions, is one of the reasons for the HRV discourse being turned into such a powerful tool with regard to post-apartheid nation-building. By giving an overview of the domains covered by the concept of reconciliation, we will get an insight into the *Foucaultian archive* of the Human Rights Violations hearings. The concept of the archive takes a central place in Foucault's 'Archéologie du Savoir' (1969) – translated as 'The Archaeology of Knowledge' (2002). One of the main objectives of the TRC was to reconstruct the apartheid experience, and to record and treasure this experience, to serve as a reminder of the past for future generations. In this way, indeed, the TRC can be considered as a public archive, "marking the institutional passage from the private to the public", as referred to by Derrida (1996: 30; 2002: 49). However, in 'The Archaeology of Knowledge' Foucault explains that when talking about the archive, he does *not* refer to the material archive:

"By this term I do not mean the sum of all the texts that a culture has kept upon its person as documents attesting to its past (...); nor do I mean the institutions, which, in a given society, make it possible to record and preserve those discourses that one wishes to remember and keep in circulation." (2002: 145).

Foucault then gives a long list of definitions of what he does mean by the term archive, among which the following are especially relevant to my theoretical approach:

"The archive is first the law of what can be said, the system that governs the appearance of statements as unique events. But the archive is also that which determines that all these things said do not accumulate endlessly in an amorphous mass (...). [I]t is that which, at the very root of the statement-event, and in that which embodies it, defines at the outset *the system of enunciability*. [I]t is that which defines the mode of occurrence of the statement-thing; it is *the system of its functioning*

(...) [I]t is that which differentiates discourses in their multiple existence and specifies them in their own duration (...) [I]t reveals the rules of a practice that enables statements both to survive and to undergo regular modification. It is *the general system of the formation and transformation of statements.*" (2002: 145-146, italics in original).

The archive can only be established by contextualising the statement: "we must grasp the statement in the exact specificity of its occurrence; determine its conditions of existence, fix at least its limits, establish correlations with other statements that may be connected with it, and show what other forms of statements it excludes" (Foucault 2002: 30-31). According to Foucault, it is obvious that the archive of a society, culture or civilisation cannot be described exhaustively, nor can it be described in its totality. For the never completed, never completely achieved uncovering of the archive, Foucault uses the term *archaeology*. When a researcher understands how the archive has been established and why one statement appears instead of another, he or she will get an insight into the regimes of power that are operating behind the use of a certain discourse. Foucault's archaeology refers to the deconstruction of these societal power relations.

In this article I will only deal with a small component of the Foucaultian archive, as I will illustrate how, at the HRV hearings, testifiers were allowed to talk about/frame/conceptualize the term reconciliation. Other components of the archive, such as investigating why the HRV committee members only asked particular questions, why the victims only talked about certain aspects of their past experience, or why certain expressions were excluded from the HRV discourse, will not be dealt with here. By uncovering this aspect of the HRV archive we will get an insight into certain power relations of the TRC vis à vis South African society.

Reconciliation as a multidimensional term at the HRV hearings

In this section I will demonstrate how the testifying HRV victims all gave a very personal interpretation of the concept of reconciliation. There seemed to exist a wide range of acceptable conceptualizations, going from testifiers who openly supported the idea of reconciliation in South Africa, to testifiers who were much more critical. I will first refer to six *ideal* testifiers; testifiers who seemed to be personifications of the most-preferred HRV reconciliation discourse. Their utterances tended to be highly valued by the HRV commissioners, and they seemed to comply largely with the preferred victim profile as constructed by the TRC. What all of these testifiers had in common was that they were in favour of reconciliation. Nevertheless, there clearly was individual variation regarding the ways in which reconciliation was interpreted. Thereafter, I will pay attention to a few victims who did not straightforwardly adhere to reconciliation, so who interpreted the concept in yet a different way. Finally, the link between reconciliation and

forgiveness will be explored in more detail, as this was one particular understanding of reconciliation before the HRV Committee.

Gregory Beck

The first *ideal* testifier I will discuss is Mr. Gregory Beck, who testified in Johannesburg in April 1996. He was a policeman and while on patrol in Soweto he had been shot by members of the United Democratic Front, one of the anti-apartheid organisations. When asked about his relationship to other people – specifically to the perpetrators who attacked him – by commissioner Magwaza, Mr. Beck speaks out in favour of forgiveness quite spontaneously:

DR MAGWAZA: Mr Beck it is obvious that your life changed after the attack, I would like to ask in what way did your life change in your relationship with other people or relationship with liberation movements? How did your life change in relation to your work? And how did your life change generally because something did change?¹

MR BECK: Yes more than likely. If all these things didn't come to the fore of what happened, then maybe I would still bear a grudge. *The reason why my life changed is that I've now learnt from all the stories I've learned from and the example that our State President has brought us for forgiving after he went through all these atrocities as well, and he can forgive, and I became more tolerant now and more understanding, which before I wasn't. I can understand now from both sides, and people's problems daily in my job as well.*

Throughout his testimony, Mr Beck overtly tries to comply with this image of a citizen of the new South Africa. He constantly uses terms such as “us”, “ours”, “every South African”, “our State President”, indicating his inclusive interpretation of the South African nation. People who do not want to abide with the new constellation should be excluded. Mr Beck clearly states that all South Africans have suffered, they all had to pay in order to be liberated – and they all should take President Mandela as an example. This testifier seems to be committed to living together peacefully with all citizens who embrace the transformation to democracy:

MR BECK: Now it becomes more clear to me what was really going on and the balance between the State at that time and the liberation movements, and I can see the viewpoint of the liberation movement as well, which they hold, or which they held to bring about what we are experiencing *in this new South Africa of ours*, and that cost *us all* to be liberated.

(...)

MR BECK: Well I know that the Commissioner of Police is trying his utmost to instill *into every policeman the new idea of the new South Africa, to be community orientated*, and to build up a good and firm and better image towards every South African, and I feel that a policeman in today's time, after hearing all these stories of the various atrocities, is still not prepared to abide with *the new South*

¹ All these fragments are literally taken from the Official TRC Website (http://www.doj.gov.za/trc/trc_frameset.htm). The italics are my own.

Africa, and with the new transparency that we have, and democracy, then he must be kicked out of the police service.

(...)

MR BECK: The reason why my life changed is that I've now learnt from all the stories I've learned from and the example that *our State President has brought us* for forgiving after he went through all these atrocities as well.

These extracts tell us that, in the case of Gregory Beck, reconciliation was mainly framed by referring to *national unity*. Mr. Beck was the prototypical example of an individual who had undergone a complete transformation, from supporting the apartheid state as a policeman in earlier days to appreciating the anti-apartheid struggle and the new dispensation in the present. Mr. Beck strongly identified with the new South Africa and this identification was then the point of departure to emphasise his commitment to reconciliation. Taking “our State President” as an example, he explicitly mentioned that he had been turned into a forgiving, tolerant and understanding citizen. We clearly get an interpretation of reconciliation that was highly valued by the TRC commissioners, since it was based on an internal transformation process and a strong commitment to national unity. This interpretation of reconciliation fits in what Wilson (2001: 107) calls the *mandarin-intellectual narrative*. This narrative rejected an individually-oriented notion of reconciliation and focused on a more abstract understanding of reconciliation. Within this approach, reconciliation was situated on the level of the nation; South Africans were urged to reconcile with their past rather than with each other.

Paul Williams

Mr. Paul Williams testified in Heideveld, also in April 1996. He got injured when members of the liberation movement APLA (Azanian People’s Liberation Army) attacked the St-James church in Cape Town in 1993. Mr. Williams explicitly tells the Commission that he is prepared to reach out to the perpetrators. There is no bitterness in his heart and he seems to have totally forgiven them:

MR NTSEBEZA: Now in view of that what - what would you like the Commission to establish?

MR WILLIAMS: Ja okay - well from my - from my level as human being my personal level, I feel I have forgiven them. *And when I say forgiven them I bear no grudges against them. There’s absolutely no bitterness within my heart towards them. If I come face to face with them I’ll be prepared to hug them out of Godly love. (...)*

Immediately thereafter, Mr. Ntsebeza inquires about the testifier’s opinion regarding the amnesty process. Again, Mr. Williams stresses that he wants to reconcile with the perpetrators, although this time he refers to the religious context as well.

MR NTSEBEZA: And finally I would like to ask a question I've asked to lot of people who have been at the receiving end. If Maqoma for instance who is serving a period of imprisonment for this attack - were to apply for Amnesty and in the view of the Amnesty Committee it could be found after all the various tests have been applied to his case that he deserves to be granted *Amnesty and he were to walk the streets as a free person as a consequence of that process. What would your reaction be?*

MR WILLIAMS: Like I said advocate, it is beyond my control that him being granted Amnesty, but should he go free and walk on the streets, *my duty as committed Christian should be I think to reach out to him. And that is what I would like to do.*

We clearly see that Paul Williams predominantly framed reconciliation *religiously*. It was mainly as a committed Christian that he wanted to reach out to his perpetrators. He did not feel any bitterness in his heart and he claimed to have completely forgiven them “out of Godly love”. It was the bible that had taught him to love his enemies and it was also based on his belief that he supported the TRC amnesty process. Here we are dealing with an approach to reconciliation in which the personal self plays only a minor role: Mr. Williams was prepared to reconcile with his attackers, but based solely on his religious conviction. In this testimony reconciliation was conceptualised on a meta-level, since it was believed to find its source not in human encounters, but in supra-natural forces.

Metro Bambiso

Mr. Metro Bambiso testified in Grahamstown, in April 1997, about his detention and torture by the police. Mr. Bambiso was not only treated as a victim by the HRV commissioners; he was also explicitly identified as a perpetrator. In fact, at the beginning of his testimony he spontaneously related how he and his comrades decided to necklace² an informer. Later on, Mr. Bambiso stated that he was prepared to reconcile with the people who had tortured him - he wanted to accept the apologies of his perpetrators and he was not revengeful. In addition, he also seemed to be prepared to reconcile with his victims, since he explicitly said that there was peace between them. In one and the same person we thus have a testifier who represented the group of reconciliation-oriented victims as well as the group of reconciliation-oriented perpetrators. Also Mr. Bambiso referred to President Mandela as a role model to follow when it comes to peace and reconciliation in South Africa. He seemed to highly respect the President and he agreed with the necessity to establish a united nation:

MR BAMBISO: My request to the Commission is that I would like the Commission to bring the perpetrators to the community in Bedford to apologise to them. The reason for this is that I want

² Necklacing became a common method of lethal lynching during disturbances in South Africa in the 1980s and 1990s, often against a suspected collaborator with the apartheid system.

to respect the President of this country, because he said that we have to be united in this country. *I do not want to revenge on what happened to me. What the President has already said, I agree with reconciliation.*

(...)

MR BAMBISO: Firstly, the reason why I referred to reconciliation is that I know that if victims or people who were oppressed by the white people, *if we want to revenge our country will not develop*. It will not be the country that we would like South Africa to be, because if I can take a gun and go to town to revenge what happened to me, *there will not be reconciliation, because our President is preaching peace in our country. I am supporting peace in this country*. That is the reason why I stated these. I do not whether the Commission understands me clearly.

(...)

CHAIRPERSON MANTHATA: What is the situation between yourself and the families of the victims? *Is there peace between you?*

MR BAMBISO: *Yes, there is peace between us.*

(...)

CHAIRPERSON MANTHATA: As you referred to the plans that are to be made in order to reconcile and develop this country, what advice would you say?

MR BAMBISO: What I would like to say is *that people are to be united and work together to build this country*.

The testimony of Metro Bambiso formed the basis for yet another way of framing reconciliation. As a victim of state security violence, Mr. Bambiso wanted to reconcile with the perpetrators; he was prepared to accept their apologies and to reconcile with them. Like Mr. Beck, Mr. Bambiso expressed community awareness, which gave his individual reconciliation a national dimension. In this case, though, reconciliation was even further developed, since Mr. Bambiso also played the role of a repenting perpetrator. He was the personification of both a reconciliation-oriented victim and a remorseful perpetrator. Hence, he was a prime example of reconciliation in the new South Africa – where every one, according to Archbishop Tutu for instance, was a victim as well as a perpetrator.

Phebel Robinson

Ms. Phebel Robinson testified in Winelands, in October 1996; her husband had been detained and tortured by the police and he died in prison. This lady seemed to be very proud of her husband's solidarity towards the community and in the course of her testimony she refers to this community spirit several times:

MS ROBINSON: My husband wasn't scared, he was not afraid of anyone and he fought for human rights. *He was a man for his community. He supported the poor, and the people that were battling*. So

many times I said to him: “You’ve got no time for your own house and your own family, we’ve got just as many problems but you are never here when I need you.” And he said: “But my wife you know where I am going to and you know my cause is a contribution to the struggle.” So once again I say that *he was not afraid of anybody and he stood for what he believed in and for his community. There are many people here that can bear testimony to that - to the fact that he stood for his community.*

(...)

MS ROBINSON: (...) But I do not have any children of my own. *As somebody said to me in other words I am raising the community’s children and I said yes, that is what my husband left me to do.*

When considering this testimony, there are significant resemblances to the one of Mr. Beck. Ms. Robinson expressed a strong sense of *community spirit*, with regard to her late husband as well as with regard to her present-day personal position. This kind of solidarity with members of the community can be seen as an aspect of national awareness – it indicated that one is prepared to live peacefully together with fellow citizens, regardless of their positions under apartheid or their social or ethnic backgrounds. Also like Mr. Beck, Ms. Robinson clearly interpreted reconciliation in a more abstract, non-individual sense, approaching it from a national/communal rather than from an individual angle. The fact that both of these victims belonged to the Coloured community, a group of people who sometimes struggled with their national identity in the new South Africa, might be indicative. Therefore, proclaiming their affinity with post-apartheid South Africa and its symbols like Nelson Mandela, and stressing their solidarity with fellow community members was particularly relevant in their case.

Mzothuli Maphumulo

Mr. Mzothuli Maphumulo testified in Newcastle, in September 1996; three of his children were killed by members of the ANC (African National Congress). Mr. Maphumulo identified as an IFP (Inkatha Freedom Party) member, although he also seemed to be open-minded towards members of the ANC. In fact, he presented himself as a mediator between these warring parties:

MR MAPHUMULO: No, I was helping the ANC instead, because I would be taken by members of the ANC and they would say I should go and talk to the youth of the ANC, maybe they would understand me because I was an elderly person. *And at times I would tell them that I should not be treated as if I was a member of IFP as well as the ANC. I was a member of the IFP, but I would go and sort their problems out for them.*

In the testimony of Mr. Maphumulo reconciliation was lifted to the *political level*. Although a member of the IFP, and a victim of ANC violence, Mr. Maphumulo presented himself as a mediator between these political factions. Importantly, his tolerance and understanding towards the different political parties not only referred to the past, it also extended to the present and the

future. This testifier was open-minded and prepared to cooperate constructively to the building of a reconciled society. In the course of his testimony reconciliation was in the first place given a personal interpretation. Indeed, Mr. Maphumulo had lost three sons as a result of political violence, which turned his reconciliation-oriented attitude into a great sacrifice. The commissioners appreciated this attitude enormously and considered the ability to reconcile with the perpetrators after such a terrible tragedy as a feature of unsurpassed personal merit. In addition to this personal touch, reconciliation was also given a political dimension, transcending the individual incident, and being made relevant to South African society at large. Reconciling different political factions was indeed crucial immediately after the transition to democracy – and also later on it remained a major political issue.

Stephanie Kemp

Mrs. Stephanie Kemp is the last ideal testifier I would like to discuss. She testified in Durban, in October 1996 and she had been detained and tortured in prison. This lady had had a white Afrikaner upbringing, which means that she belonged to the higher social classes. She became an active member of the South African Communist Party and after her detention she went into exile to London. She was absolutely committed to reconciliation in South Africa, as is clear from the following extract:

MRS KEMP: *Without question reconciliation is necessary for the survival of our country. And I think if it wasn't for our president, it would have perhaps been harder for me and many people like me, to even contemplate the possibility of reconciliation.*

What is very striking in the testimony of Mrs. Kemp is that we learn how she has been torn apart by an identity struggle – as an Afrikaner anti-apartheid activist:

MRS KEMP: *By the early 1960s when I was at the University of Cape Town, studying physiotherapy I had come to the painful realization that the poverty, that Sharpeville and detention without trial were ways in which my own people were trying to claw their way into white privilege in our country. I never spoke Afrikaans again until my return from exile in 1990.*

(...)

MRS KEMP: *But I was born an Afrikaner, and from childhood we were fed, force fed if I might say on the glory of our people in the Anglo Boer War.*

(...)

MRS KEMP: *For me the horror of the apartheid years is compounded by the loss to me through its prostitution of my language and my culture. The direction that Afrikaner nationalism took into obliterating all in its wake now, no matter how murderously, I lay at the feet of the Broederbond, the Dutch Reformed Church and the National Party.*

(...)

MRS KEMP: I think I feel particularly bitter because once I came back into the country I found that it did matter to me that I wanted my culture back. I did feel - *I do feel very bitter and angry that these people took my language, they took my being, and they turned it into this machine.*

Mrs. Kemp's approach to reconciliation also fitted in the mandarin-intellectual narrative, since she explicitly expressed her support for national reconciliation. However, in this case reconciliation was given an extra dimension that was not so much a political rather than an *ethno-cultural* one. Mrs. Kemp seemed to struggle with her white/Afrikaner identity, since she actually presented a symbiosis between an anti-apartheid activist and a beneficiary of the apartheid system. In her testimony the opposition between white/Afrikaner and victim of the apartheid regime/Communist was transcended. Clearly, it was reconciliation between bearers of the Afrikaner culture and speakers of Afrikaans on the one hand, and ANC activists and apartheid exiles (so people who tended to be opposed to both the Afrikaner culture and Afrikaans) on the other hand that was at stake. Based on Mrs. Kemp's testimony reconciliation was given a national dimension, whereby reconciliation should take place in the first place between Afrikaners and non-Afrikaners – not, as was the case with Mr. Maphumulo for instance, between members of the IFP and the ANC.

Non-ideal testifiers

By paying attention to the way reconciliation was framed by these ideal testifiers, we should not forget that, sometimes, reconciliation was also conceptualised in a less preferred manner before the HRV Committee. Testifiers were allowed to express their resistance against reconciliation, for instance by only *conditionally* accepting reconciliation. This happened in the testimony of Mr. John Buthelezi, who testified in Duduza in February 1997 and who related a story about detention, torture and betrayal. Mr. Buthelezi explicitly mentioned that he would only reconcile after he had met the traitors or informers:

MR BUTHELEZI: I will explicitly emphasise the fact that *I will never reconcile until I mention those who wanted to attack me and kill me.*

MR LEWIN: Could we have quiet please.

MR BUTHELEZI: *I will only reconcile if I will be given opportunity to see those people who called me informers,*

(...)

MR BUTHELEZI: (...) I want to tell you that I will only reconcile when only I could be given opportunity to see those people who were painting others black and yet they were the evil ones, the traitors and the informers. *That is when I will reconcile.*

MR MANTHATA: *Order please. Order, order please. We are asking you could you please be quiet. Go on.*

The audience is very noisy when listening to Mr. Buthelezi's testimony, probably because he implies that the informers belong to the community and that they are even present in the hall. The leading commissioners try to calm down the audience, in order for the testifier to complete his story. What is striking, is that, in spite of his resistance against reconciliation, Mr. Buthelezi is allowed to express his feelings. This tells us that a negative conceptualization of reconciliation was also a possibility before the HRV Committee.

A similar example comes from Mr. Patrick Morake, a young man who was attacked by a group of right-wing Afrikaners, an attack whereby his car was destroyed. He testified in Welkom, in October 1996. This testifier did not openly speak out against reconciliation like Mr. Buthelezi. Nevertheless, he did express clear resentment vis à vis white people:

COMMISSIONER GCABASHE: How do you feel ever since this has happened?

MR.MORAKE: This occurrence changed my life so drastically. *I feel I have this deep hatred for a white person. When I see a white person, especially at night I have these negative thoughts and even at work when I white person speaks to me I just look at him. I totally distrust them because during the day they are people and in the evening they are killers.* Even when I'm driving a car and passing through Brandfort these thoughts come back to me so vividly as if it only happened yesterday. I just don't know how to explain this. Each time I think of this occurrence and I think of this attack ...
(incomplete)

(...)

COMMISSIONER GCABASHE: Now, when you say, ever since this incident took place and you have this problematic relationship with white people, *did you ever try to get any treatment or some counselling with regard to that?*

MR. MORAKE: No, I've never thought of getting any treatment because *I feel that where they are, they are the ones who should be getting the treatment.* I think where they are they are the ones who are supposed to receive the treatment because I think they were the ones who are sick.

In this fragment, Mr. Morake argues that he feels this deep hatred for white persons; he distrusts them completely, since "they are people during the day, but killers at night". It is likely that utterances such as these were not appreciated by the HRV commissioners. Nevertheless, though, the commissioner showed understanding by proposing a treatment for his traumatic state of mind.

The last testifier I would like to refer to is Nelson Jantjie who testified in Karoo, in October 1996. He talked about his sister who was shot by the police and about his own imprisonment. The terms reconciliation or forgiveness were not mentioned in this testimony. The testifier was clearly very angry, but he did not openly refuse to reconcile. In this case

reconciliation seemed to be regarded as a possibility by the HRV commissioners. Commissioner Seroke tried to temper his anger by emphasising the necessity for peaceful coexistence; she even argued that she understood Mr. Jantjie's anger:

MR JANTJIE: *I am angry, I am not working* - I have been tortured by police, I suffer, I am of ill health, I am unemployed, I suffer, my kidneys are not all right.

MS SEROKE: We understand - we understand.

MR JANTJIE: These people - *the perpetrators they are alive, what are you doing about them* - my life is ruined, what are you doing about them? They were not even jailed, I could not even go to my sister's funeral, I was in detention.(...)

MS SEROKE: Mr Nelson we understand your situation.

MR JANTJIE: I am in pain, this police that tortured me, they are working, I am unemployed, these people walk pass me everyday, the others are in De Aar - they still under employment, I cannot work for myself because of them. I don't gain anything from that - my children they all over the streets, they are criminals, they do not go to school.

MS SEROKE: We understand your pain, *but we ask that you try to control yourself*. So that even when we ask our investigation team to find - to find out what happened, *we as the Truth Commission would like to reach a place where there can be peace and forgiveness*.

The underlying message here appeared to be that resentful testifiers could also be moved towards reconciliation. Mr. Jantjie's expressions of hatred were not really addressed, although the commissioner kept stressing that she understood his situation. The victim was allowed to be angry, but according to the reaction of the commissioners all hope should not be abandoned when it comes to promoting reconciliation.

When considering these three 'non-ideal' testifiers, we notice that before the HRV Committee essentially every expression and motivation of reconciliation was accepted. Testifiers were allowed to express hatred and resentment, as long as these sentiments could be rectified, for instance by ignoring them and stressing peace and forgiveness instead; they were also allowed to only conditionally accept reconciliation - all of which turning reconciliation into a multilayered and inclusive concept, a concept most South Africans could relate to.

Interpreting reconciliation before the TRC – too much forgiveness?

One of the ways in which reconciliation was interpreted before the HRV Committee was according to what Wilson (2001: 104-109) calls the *religious-redemptive narrative*. The religious-redemptive narrative pursued a notion of reconciliation as a common good, defined by confession, forgiveness and redemption, and the exclusion of vengeance. This kind of reconciliation discourse did not so much seek the reconciliation of the nation, but the

reconciliation between individuals within the nation. One of the main critiques formulated vis à vis the TRC was that this religiously oriented interpretation of reconciliation was too prominently present at the HRV hearings. Colvin (2003: 9) for instance, claimed that the dramatic figure of Desmond Tutu, dressed in his purple robe, urging not only victims, but all South Africans, to put the ethic of forgiveness into practice, had been an enduring image of the TRC. Some critics said that the Christian doctrine of forgiveness seemed to be continually invoked, together with other religious values such as the importance of the community and the sanctity of the truth (Corry & Terre Blanche 2000: 9). Also Claire Moon, in her work 'Narrating Political Reconciliation' (2008: 122), tells us that "the language of forgiveness dominated the public hearings of the TRC".

Although a number of authors have been trying to take forgiveness out of its traditional exclusive association with personal religion and morality, such as Shriver (1997) and Derrida (2001), in the case of the TRC forgiveness tends to be largely located in the religious domain, indeed. One of the reasons for this was that Chairman Desmond Tutu in particular used to frame the HRV testimonies in theological terms – although this was also a recurring feature amongst other committee members with a religious background, such as Alex Boraine, Piet Meiring and Reverend Finca. In addition, also the hall where the hearings took place was usually transformed into a proto-religious setting: the tables were covered in long white cloths, flowers were displayed, and a candle was lit at the beginning of the hearings (Bozzoli 1998: 170).

I will not underestimate the power of the Christian doctrine before the HRV hearings, and indeed, when going over the victim testimonies, the terms reconciliation and (personal) forgiveness were used interchangeably by a number of committee members and testifiers. However, the gist of my argument is that the HRV hearings allowed for multiple interpretations of the reconciliation concept in the first place. Reconciliation sometimes fitted Wilson's *religious-redemptive narrative* – as is the case with Mr. Paul Williams -, but also cultural, political and nationalist conceptualisations were common. Linking reconciliation with the Christian notion of forgiveness was only one way in which the concept of reconciliation was given shape. Besides, as we understand from the testimony of Mr. Gregory Beck, the word *forgiveness* was also used when the testifier's interpretation of reconciliation fitted the nation-building narrative. We could argue that in this testimony forgiveness is approached from a political point of view. It can be seen as an illustration of *political forgiveness*, since, as claimed by Gobodo-Madikizela (2008: 41), "Forgiveness in politics is an appropriate response particularly if, as in South Africa, victims have to live together with perpetrators and beneficiaries in the same country.". Living together peacefully in a unified and peaceful nation was indeed one of the main concerns of Mr. Beck.

As I will illustrate in the next section, it is this multilayeredness of the term reconciliation that caused the TRC to exert a great deal of power on South African society.

Reconciliation and society

By referring to various HRV testifiers I have tried to uncover a part of the archive of the Human Rights Violations hearings. It seems to be clear that a lot of space was left for the testifiers to interpret reconciliation in a way that suited their own personal experiences, ranging from victims who unconditionally wanted to reconcile with their perpetrators, to victims who were angry and frustrated, but who were still received with a great deal of understanding by the HRV commissioners. I would argue that it is the existence of multiple versions of the reconciliation-concept that caused the reconciliation discourse to have a fundamental impact on South African society. Because the term was so multidimensional and inclusive, it was acceptable to a wide variety of South Africans. Because of its multilayeredness many people could identify with this concept, and because of its vagueness, the debate on reconciliation was sustained in South Africa. It is remarkable to see how the term reconciliation dominated societal discourse during the proceedings of the TRC and in the years following the Commission's work. I would like to distinguish two separate ways in which reconciliation discourse impacted on society in that period.

First of all there is the concrete use of the term reconciliation, alongside terms like 'rainbow nation', 'transformation' and 'ubuntu'. For more than two entire years – from April 1996 till July 1998 – South African society was permeated by the proceedings of the HRV Committee. The national as well as the international media devoted a lot of attention to the hearings of the HRVC (Wilson 2001: 21). As also claimed by Goodman (2003: 80), "it was especially the individual public hearings, along with extensive media coverage, that caused the notion of reconciliation to filter through to South African society". Not only did the media cover the proceedings of the TRC to its full extent, also special programmes and documentaries were broadcast, such as *Special Report* and *Long Night's Journey Into Day*; in all of these programmes the concept of reconciliation took a prominent position. Looking into the domain of culture, also post-apartheid theatre was preoccupied with the theme of reconciliation. A number of plays dealt explicitly with the TRC – the best known probably being 'Ubu and the Truth Commission', by Jane Taylor, but also the general themes of forgiveness and reconciliation were discussed elaborately. Apparently, in that post-1994 period, even former practitioners of protest theatre turned to the theatre of reconciliation (Mda, 2002: 281). On an academic level as well, the

discourse of reconciliation definitely left its traces. Numerous courses, debates, conferences and discussion groups have been set up, all of which concentrating on the issue of reconciliation in South Africa. Also the number of academic publications on reconciliation has skyrocketed in post-1994 South Africa: Brian Frost's 'Struggling to Forgive, Nelson Mandela and South Africa's Search for Reconciliation' (1998), Mark Hay's 'Ukubuyisana. Reconciliation in South Africa' (1998), John de Gruchy's 'Reconciliation: restoring Justice' (2002), Chapman & van der Merwe's 'Truth and reconciliation in South Africa: did the TRC deliver?' (2008) and du Bois & du Bois-Pedain 'Justice and Reconciliation in post-apartheid South Africa' (2008) are but a few examples. On an institutional level, the TRC formed only part of the institutions of 'redress' developed by the new government. Already during the Mandela era, but mainly afterwards, long-lasting initiatives were taken on this institutional level. Let me just mention some of the initiatives taken in post-1994 or post-TRC South Africa (<http://www.csvr.org.za/links.htm#tru>): the activities of the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (CSVr) - which was established in 1989 - were extended, amongst others by launching the Khulumani Support Group in 1995 and by setting up a 'Register of Reconciliation' in 1997; the Institute for the Healing of Memories was established in August 1998; and the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation was launched in May 2000. Small-scale initiatives were taken, such as the Lyndi Fourie Foundation and also universities participated in this drive towards reconciliation - like the University of Cape Town with its Transitional Justice Project and its Centre for Conflict Resolution. Initiatives were also taken to introduce reconciliation at the grassroots level of South African society. In 'Learning to Live Together' (du Toit, 2003), Verwoerd gives a few examples of individuals who came together through the TRC, and who continued their journey of personal reconciliation also after the TRC had finished. Apartheid victims or their relatives helped to promote healing among other traumatised victims, while apartheid perpetrators were committed to help reconstructing the communities where they made havoc. In addition to the personal initiatives, this publication also illustrates practices of social reconciliation. All over South Africa community leaders were trying to enhance reconciliation, for instance by creating a platform for interracial cooperation and dialogue (du Toit, 2003: 280). In organisations and companies, reconciliation was built through training and participation, and also at schools and among student leaders reconciliation was brought into practice, often with the help of committed volunteers. Also Boraine (2000: 363) argues that "there are numerous examples in South Africa where the commitment to reconciliation, religious or secular, has transformed lives and has brought about a change of behaviour and a genuine attempt to right the wrongs within society". "Despite our country's history of conflict and prejudice", he continues, "there are countless examples of black and white

finding each other and working together”. Also internationally, reconciliation became the identifying label of South Africa – only look at the fact that South Africa is regularly framed as a ‘rainbow country’ or a ‘multicultural’ nation, characterised by ‘diversity’ and peaceful coexistence (Rassool 2000: 1).

Secondly, and to my opinion more fundamental, is the fact that the HRV reconciliation discourse opened up the *debate* on reconciliation in South Africa. After the transition to democracy in 1994 a new discourse had to be established to talk about South African society. As claimed by Gobodo-Madikizela (2003: 56), “it is always necessary to forge a vocabulary of peace in the aftermath of mass tragedy”. People had to start thinking about one another differently, which also involved talking about and to one another by means of a language adapted to the new dispensation. According to my interpretation, it is in this search for a new socio-political discourse that the TRC acted as a catalyst, with the HRV reconciliation discourse forming the foundation of this wider societal discourse. Also Doxtader & Villa-Vicencio (2003: XIV-XVI) argued that, after the TRC, reconciliation ‘fostered important debates’. The significance of these debates being that South Africans were provoked to ask questions about the possibilities to deal with the apartheid past through the concept of reconciliation. People started to reflect on reconciliation and to look at the feasibility of reconciliation in their personal lives. Norval (2009: 312) is also convinced that some of the lasting contributions of the TRC are of a discursive nature, stating that the TRC has “provoked open and democratic debate [...] as well as reflection on the character of justice, truth and the role of memory and reconciliation in a fledgling democracy”. Indeed, I would claim that it is partly as a result of the HRV reconciliation discourse that reconciliation became a point of discussion in South Africa. The concept became part of South African public life, which might have influenced people’s perspective on society.

Therefore, we can take this impact of the HRV reconciliation discourse one step further, and argue that the TRC even contributed to the continuation of an *atmosphere of reconciliation* among South Africans after 1994. This is also put forward by Gibson (2004) after having carried out his research on current day attitudes towards reconciliation in South Africa. He maintained that “[those South Africans] who are more accepting of the TRC’s version of the truth are more likely to be reconciled” and “accepting the TRC’s truth certainly did not contribute to ‘irreconciliation’” (Gibson 2004: 334-335). To me, the impact of the TRC might not have been manifest; it is not a tangible result we can clearly pinpoint. Instead, it can be described as an underlying current, a *tendency to reconciliation* many South Africans might not be openly aware of. This corresponds to the ideas expressed by Antjie Krog in the epilogue to the 1999-edition of her book ‘Country of My Skull’. In this postscript she wonders whether the TRC process has indeed

achieved reconciliation in South Africa. What is *not* visible, she claims, is “reconciliation as a mysterious Judaeo-Christian process”. Instead, what we see daily is “reconciliation as one of the most basic skills applied in order to survive conflict”. Therefore, Krog also seems to be convinced that it is first and foremost in the daily lives of South Africans that we find this intangible spirit of reconciliation.

It is important to note, however, that the impact of the TRC reconciliation discourse mainly seemed to be notable in the years immediately following the Commission’s proceedings. According to the South African Reconciliation Barometer 2008 there has been a decline relating to optimism about the co-existence between people of different races. In explaining these findings regarding race relations, the Barometer refers to some incidents that had an impact on public opinion, such as the racist video at the University of the Free State in March 2008 and the xenophobic attacks in May 2008. Additionally, there seems to be a decrease in economic and physical security in South Africa, and, as the Reconciliation Barometer concludes, “...severe economic insecurity has the potential to aggravate what remains a very raw wound in our society” (<http://www.ijr.org.za/politicalanalysis/reconcbar/sarb-media-report-final.pdf>). This indicates that even 16 years after the end of apartheid reconciliation still needs to be worked on. The stable and democratic situation in South African cannot be taken for granted; keeping the debate on reconciliation going and restoring trust in the state institutions are two ways in which the new presidency might be able to realize reconciliation at a profound level (Jan Hofmeyr, 2009: 7).

Conclusion

It is quite likely that the HRV Committee’s reconciliation discourse has shaped the way South Africans think, feel and act. As Gerwel (2000: 123) puts it, the initial idea of the TRC was to deal with the past as quickly and efficiently as possible, so that South Africans could put the past behind them. However, the TRC became so dominant in everyday life that it began to take a life on its own.

I have tried to illustrate that at the HRV hearings, the term reconciliation was constructed in a very vague and multidimensional manner. One of the effects was that most South Africans could relate to the polysemic and highly inclusive notion of reconciliation. They could identify with one unifying concept and this turned them into proud citizens of the new South Africa. I would argue that the vagueness of the term reconciliation was a deliberate choice from the side of the TRC. It was an inevitable choice: defining reconciliation unambiguously and restricting reconciliation discourse in such a way that it would only allow for a number of limited

interpretations, would never have had the same impact on South African society. If this had been the case, the debate on reconciliation would not have become so dominant in South Africa and never would so many people – both nationally and internationally – have started to reflect on the value of restorative justice and peaceful conflict resolution. Deconstructing an aspect of the Foucaultian archive of the victim hearings, by illustrating how multifaceted the HRV reconciliation discourse was, made us understand how powerful a tool this discourse has been in post-TRC South Africa. I hope to have shown that this power should definitely be seen as a constructive and advantageous force in terms of South Africa's future

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