

*In Rwanda We Say...The Family That Does Not Speak Dies*, 2004. A Film by Laurent Bocahut & Anne Aghion. Distributed by First Run/Icarus Films. VHS, color, 54 min.

In 1994, the world witnessed one of the most tragic genocides carried out by people whose minds were poisoned by hate, intolerance and ethnic irredentism. The peace of the graveyard that the departing Belgian colonialists had created in Rwanda, which had seen the Tutsi-a minority ethnic group enjoying more privileges than the Hutu-the majority ethnic group in most aspects of the country's socio-political calculations, had created tension and restiveness among the two ethnic groups. The Hutu resented the second class citizen status, and claimed that the Tutsi were responsible for their plight. They railed against the domination of the civil service, private sector and the military by the minority Tutsi. Occasionally, these tensions had flared to surface, leaving a few deaths, and further creating a deeper gulf and chasm between the two competing ethnic groups.

The government of President Juvenal Habyarimana had tried to work toward lessening of tensions and to create a lasting peace among the two ethnic groups. This tenuous peace however, was to implode in April 1994, when the Hutu born President Habyarimana was killed in a plane crash on his way back from a peace conference with the Paul Kagame led Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), a Tutsi rebel group which had taken to guerrilla warfare in order to protect the Tutsi people whom RPF claimed were being systematically killed by government troops.

The Hutu suspected that the death of President Habyarimana the handiwork work of the Tutsi rebels. In the reprisal that followed, over 800,000 Tutsi were slaughtered. Families turned against one another. The very foundation of family as a building block of cohesiveness was shattered. Tutsi men married to Hutu were betrayed by their in-laws to Hutu murderous goons on the prowl for Tutsi. In the atmosphere of lawlessness and chaos that followed, life for the Tutsi became "nasty, brutish and short" as in Thomas Hobbes' conceptual state of nature. The world unfortunately did nothing to prevent the genocide. Its inaction has left a permanent and collective scar on the consciousness of the international community.

Paul Kagame, the erstwhile rebel leader who eventually became the President after the genocide in an attempt to restore peace and a sense of inclusiveness, established a Truth and Reconciliation-type People's Tribunal under the Gacaca Laws, an indigenous public tribunal vested with the legal authority to try former killers if they could confess their involvement and participation in the pogrom. Upon their eventual confession and forgiveness from the survivors, they were to be released and rehabilitated within the community.

The film details the struggle at reconciliation, the internal conflict, pain, and emotions of the survivors now being made by the Gacaca provisions to live, work and interact with the same people who had murdered their loved ones.

The film set in rural Rwanda, captures the struggle to come to terms with the role of one of such killers-Abraham Rwamfizi, by the survivors of the genocide. Abraham Rwamfizi at a Gacaca tribunal having been fingered and unassailably linked to the death of Modeste Kalise by his wife – and also by Faissa Mukabazimya both Hutu widows, confessed to being one of the leaders of the gang of death. The tribunal being satisfied with his admission of guilt set him free and sent him back to his community.

The film takes an interesting twist at this point. Back in his community and confronting some survivors of the genocide, which curiously included a member of his own family, Wencelses Mutenberazi his Tutsi brother-in-law, whose aged mother Mutenberazi said “was thrown inside a latrine”, Rwamfizi talked about his hands being tied by the prevailing atmosphere of revenge on the part of Hutu who were willing and ready to sacrifice any Tutsi blood even if they were part of their immediate or nuclear family. In a classic Kantian Categorical Imperative scenario, he recounted how he had to kill a nephew in order to save two others, one of whom he said is 22 years old today.

In a scene that speaks to the title of the film, both the survivors and the hatchet man, Rwamfizi between rounds of beer, talked candidly about the need to forget and forgive and forge a new sense of bond “we exterminated each other even though we are brothers” Rwamfizi had regretted an admission that struck a chord in a Tutsi’s heart: “we must live together”, a line that was similarly reiterated by Jean Baptiste Sibomana: “vengeance is not an option for us”.

The spirit of reconciliation and forgiveness is palpable. Even though the presence of the former killers evokes a sense of dread as evidenced by two Tutsi widows who questioned the wisdom of rehabilitating the killers, wondering “if they’ll start all over-come back to cut us up”, the community is determined to move forward and embrace the difficult process of reconciliation.

That a people who once were mortal enemies could find a thread of compassion anchored on forgiveness is a very powerful message that the film expresses. It shows the capacity of Africans to resolve their internal crises and conflicts in line with their cultural and social mores. The question however remains: would the internal conflicts and repressed anger that some of the survivors expressed someday erupt and launch them again on a path to mutual destruction? We hope not.

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