

# Heart of Darkness That Was Rwanda

A Decade After the Massacre, New Films Revisit the Horror

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NEW YORK -- You can see the shock and humiliation on his face, even now, 10 years later. In the new "Frontline" documentary, "Ghosts of Rwanda," Bonaventure Niyibizi speaks of that moment when he believed he would die.

Genocide had gripped his homeland. Thousands of his countrymen were slaughtering men, women and children. A United Nations peacekeeping force could not help; it was hamstrung by orders from New York to stand down. The United States evacuated all of its personnel but not its local employees, including Niyibizi, who had worked for the U.S. Agency for International Development for 10 years. He was Rwandan. He was African. He would not be saved, at least not by the Americans.

"I saw them leaving," he says in one of the documentary's many poignant moments. "I saw the flags on the vehicles. I knew all the vehicles. I knew the people they belonged to. I think it was sad, surprising, to see that [at] the end of the day you are a person who has to die, when other people are allowed to be alive."

Niyibizi was here this week, just for a day, to help producer Greg Barker promote the new film, which airs April 8 on WETA (and Thursday on MPT). The 10th anniversary of the genocide will be marked next month. Both this film and one titled "In Rwanda We Say . . . The Family That Does Not Speak Dies," by Anne Aghion, which premieres at Visions Bar Noir on Monday (and will be shown April 5 on the Sundance Channel), are part of the commemoration, part of the ongoing effort to say "never again" and to counter the international silence and misinformation of 1994 that so cruelly sealed the fate of the 800,000 Rwandan dead and the millions more left alive and traumatized.

After taping a segment of PBS's "Charlie Rose" inside a Bloomberg TV studio, Niyibizi looks out of sorts -- a bit sad, a bit distracted. "Ghosts of Rwanda," a comprehensive two-hour portrayal of the international policy failure on Rwanda, includes gruesome scenes -- mounds of bodies in varying degrees of dismemberment and decay. And Niyibizi is thinking of the many people he knew who perished in such piles. His extended family. His mother, her Achilles tendons severed by a machete.

"There are many things that are coming to mind," Niyibizi says, sitting in the greenroom, where one of Rose's producers is weeping at the scenes she has just watched.

"When I look at those images, for me, I put names on them," he says.

Rwandans such as Niyibizi have been telling their nation's story for a decade, how in 100 days starting April 7, 1994, Rwanda's extremist Hutu government and military led a

campaign to exterminate the nation's minority Tutsis, who were 15 percent of the population. Moderate Hutus also were killed for not embracing the "logic" of genocide. It was a logic, clearly twisted, that gave the killings a moral cause, at least for those who killed.

Likewise for a decade, Rwanda has been working to counter that logic, to tamp down the tensions between two groups that are more like separate castes than distinct ethnic groups.

The narratives told by the surviving victims and their supporters are part of that process of healing. These narratives have been told in film, in books, in human rights reports, but most importantly and very carefully by Rwandans to Rwandans, by victims talking to the killers and vice versa.

For many, the memory of the genocide is fresh.

"Ten years looks as if it was yesterday," says Niyibizi, who holds a position in the government's privatization agency and lives and works among the Hutu, as do most Tutsis.

"You remember clearly the situation as if it was yesterday. So for us, it's not something which has disappeared."

Rwanda is a traumatized nation still grappling with the tensions between its two main population groups. Led by President Paul Kagame, the Tutsi rebel leader whose forces quashed the genocide, Rwanda's government has dedicated itself to fostering reconciliation, with mixed results, human rights officials say. "The threat," as Niyibizi puts it, still exists.

The tension is felt perhaps most deeply in the rural and impoverished hills, where people live in close proximity, which means neighbor killed neighbor during the genocide.

One such community, a small hillside "cell," or village, of several hundred people, is the subject of Aghion's "In Rwanda We Say . . ."

Aghion has taken her camera deep into Rwandan life, to chronicle how the country's survivors and perpetrators are trying to live together anew.

The film picks up where Aghion's earlier work left off. In her 2002 documentary, "Gacaca, Living Together Again in Rwanda?" (which also airs on April 5 on the Sundance Channel), she chronicles the concept of the *gacaca*, or traditional village courts, where villagers sit as judges to weigh the cases of alleged killers. With nearly 100,000 genocide suspects rounded up over the past 10 years, justice officials in Rwanda introduced the *gacaca* system to try some of the local rural cases and ease the strain on the overburdened court system. (The more serious cases, of those who organized the genocide, are being tried before the International Criminal Tribunal at Arusha, Tanzania.)

But there are other killers, those who have confessed while imprisoned, served their time and have been released. The killers walk again in Rwanda's hills, where "In Rwanda We Say . . ." takes place.

Where "Frontline's" "Ghosts of Rwanda" persuades us with its lineup of penetrating and relentlessly regretful Western interviewees -- Gen. Romeo Dallaire (the Canadian who headed the small U.N. peacekeeping force in Rwanda when the massacre broke out), U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan, former president Bill Clinton, former U.N. ambassador Madeleine Albright -- Aghion's film portrays only Rwandans in that hard place of today, living with their malaise and their ghosts.

There are no journalistic interviews, no narrator to keep the pace flowing. Instead, the narrative is carried by the tension that shows plainly in the faces of Aghion's subjects, in their difficult but always poetic words, in their long silences, in the haunting thunder and rain that roar over the deeply rural and impoverished place called Gafumba.

"This is where we brought Tutsi for killing," says Abraham Rwamfiza, a Hutu who has come home to a hill that is roiling with emotion over how or whether to accept him.

"Someone who hurt you returns, and you are told to hold your tongue," says Jean-Paul Shyirakera, a genocide survivor, speaking as if confiding to the camera.

"We were told that they would approach us in peace in their own time. But not one has so far darkened my door. My brother's murderer lives near our home. Why hasn't he come to ask forgiveness? Next time you come, bring him with you."

He smiles sarcastically.

"We could talk to our executioners."

Aghion pondered this for some weeks. It would be risky, considering the tensions, to put victims and perpetrators together prematurely or without proper constraints. She consulted Gafumba residents to see what they thought.

"I went around and spoke to everybody, very seriously and very simply, and I said, 'Listen, you don't need to show up, but think about it.' "

And they came. So did Rwamfiza. And no one seems quite sure what to say, how to feel.

Aghion has spent so much time in Gafumba doing her films that the comfort level and tolerance for the camera is extraordinary. Her subjects seem, like Shyirakera, to take the camera into their confidence. There is a precious but piercing scene in which two women speak grimly of being the living dead.

"Yes. It's true," says Euphrasie Mukarwemera. "Our killers have returned. What can we do? Why speak of it. Go speak to them. We can only hope they'll toe the line, that they won't start cutting us to pieces.

"Let them do me a favor and get it over with," she says.

"I'm already dead," says Bellancilla Kangabe.

"Why are they asking us this?" Mukarwemera says, referring to the filmmakers. "They want to know how we feel about the return. . . . These whites ask the strangest questions."

And then the two women share a laugh about joining their ancestors up in the volcanoes.

There are no bodies in Aghion's films. Her work focuses on life after the genocide, on the lives of the living. In that way, "In Rwanda We Say . . ." and "Gacaca" are a strong complement to "Ghosts of Rwanda," which tells us how it all happened.

Perhaps the most comprehensive documentary look at the genocide, it is a chronology of events before and during the killing. And its gruesomeness is not at all an over-dramatization, says Barker, the producer, who gave much consideration to what level of carnage to show.

"In the end, we decided you had to show people what it was like, because that was the reality," he said.

The footage of the dead punctuates a narrative of maddening international indifference to Rwanda's straits. The moral tone of the film is set by Gen. Dallaire. The genocide happened on his watch. He is a man haunted -- haunted, he tells us, by the eyes of the dead and dying.

"They're looking at me with my blue beret and saying, 'What in the hell happened?' "

It is the question, really, that everyone in the film tries to answer. We hear Albright express her regret. We hear Anthony Lake, Clinton's national security adviser, describe in antiseptic policy terms how the killing in Rwanda was never a priority at the highest levels of the administration.

"It never became a serious issue," he says.

We see clips of State Department officials making tortuous statements about Rwanda but without using the word "genocide," because the White House had decided through most of the crisis that the "G" word should not be used, so as not to invoke calls for U.S. action.

There are stories of heartening heroism, from the U.N. peacekeepers and from civilians. Gregory "Gromo" Alex, a U.N. aid worker evacuated in the genocide's early days, returns soon after to help the small band of people trying to save whoever they could.

And throughout, we see machete-wielding killers at the crude checkpoints they set up all over the capital of Kigali to inspect the identity books of passersby. Those books, a pernicious legacy of Belgian colonialism, listed each person as Hutu or Tutsi (or Twa, a 1 percent minority of Pygmies). It made the killing easy.

The killers used lists -- lists of people to kill. The planned nature of the genocide was such that each neighborhood, each hill, knew in advance who to target.

Fortunately for him, his wife and their children (then ages 3, 2 and 3 months), Niyibizi received a warning from someone in the neighborhood.

"You know, you are the last on the list," the neighbor told him.

He hid his family in the basement of a nearby abandoned house. Then they managed to flee to a large church compound, where some 150 people ultimately would congregate. The Niyibizis hid in one of the church's small outbuildings.

When the killers began arriving to take people away for slaughter, they looked for Niyibizi. A Hutu saved his life by telling the killers that Niyibizi had already been taken away.

From April 15 until June 3, Niyibizi and his family stayed indoors. They did not dare show their faces.

Most of the people in the church compound were slaughtered.

Niyibizi and his family fled to a safe camp for Tutsi survivors, set up by the Tutsi rebels of the Rwandan Patriotic Army, who would become the next government.

He lived to ponder this: What is the nature of evil?

He knows the politics of the genocide. He knows the logic of the genocide. He knows the long history of enmity and colonial manipulation that sparked the genocide.

But when he remembers the bodies, Niyibizi, whispering now, cannot help but ask himself again and again, "How do you do that? How do you do that?"