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Righteous Hutus: Can stories of courageous rescuers help in Rwanda's reconciliation process

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Many believe that stories of heroic rescuers can make a modest contribution to reconciliation efforts years after genocide occurs. One extended effort to gather stories of Hutu rescuers in Rwanda led to a Kinyarwanda publication and the posting of a blogsite with several dozen narratives. The purpose of this paper is to share the essence of some of the rescue stories and observations about the reconciliation process in that country. The slowly growing number of Hutu rescue stories now emerging is grounds for very cautious optimism about the country's gradual reconciliation.

Key words: Rwanda, Kinyarwanda, genocide, reconciliation, rescue, stories, courage, religion.

INTRODUCTION

The gruesome 1994 genocide in Rwanda was remarkable in many ways.¹ The speed and efficiency of the mass murders, numbering roughly 800,000 in a period of less than three months, exceeded even the Holocaust. Almost eighty percent of the Tutsi population was destroyed (as compared to almost two thirds of the Jewish population lost in Europe).² Most scholars such as Prunier (1995) and Jones (2006) initially emphasized the widespread, enthusiastic participation of ordinary Hutus who were involved in the killing of Tutsis and politically moderate Hutus. In contrast, Jefremovas (1995) argued that it was a small minority of Hutus who were directly involved in the killing. There is compelling evidence, she wrote, "that the policy of genocide in Rwanda was not supported by a majority of the people."³

No matter the number of perpetrators, there can be little doubt that many Hutus took part in the genocide. They were under great pressure to participate and some who refused to do so were themselves attacked. It now seems reasonable to assume that significant but countless numbers of Hutus were able to save Tutsis. It should be remembered that the documentation of European rescuers of Jews during the Holocaust by researchers at the Yad Vashem Holocaust memorial in Jerusalem began roughly 15 years after World War II and continues today. As of now, well over 20,000 names with stories of "Righteous Gentiles" have been verified (Gilbert, 2004). Likewise, one can expect that many hundreds, if not thousands, of Rwandan Hutu rescuers will be identified in years to come. Those individuals can also be described as 'righteous'. Rescue stories have an intrinsic value:

they can be inspirational to all of us, including both Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda. They can also diminish stereotypes that perpetuate distrust and hostility there. Thus they may encourage reconciliation in a modest way, although there is little empirical evidence to support that assumption.⁴

Story gathering

One starting point in the gathering of stories of rescuers was a cursory review of extant literature on the genocide. The author used that approach as well as the placement of announcements soliciting interviews in Rwandan newspapers, beginning in 2007. The solicitations were in Kinyarwanda and English languages albeit not French. Among the earliest (and still reliable) studies of the event are the works of Omaar (1995), Prunier (1995), Des Forges (1999) and Mamdani (2001). Those similar works include vague or nameless references to Hutu rescuers. There are also many publications with the stories of genocide survivors.⁵ (JAM International 2003; Whitworth 2006; Ilibagiza 2006; Hatzfeld 2000, 2005; and Lyons 2006). The survivor stories also contain numerous references to anonymous Hutus who assisted or sheltered Tutsis. The first to publish stories of several Hutu rescuers was Jefremovas (1995), who suggested the need for more stories of that kind. Several years later Omaar (2002) with the nongovernmental organisation (NGO) "African Rights", documented vignettes celebrating more than a dozen rescuers in a London

publication that is now apparently out of print. Yet despite much evidence that many more narratives of Hutu rescuers could easily be gathered, only a relatively small number has been published. For over a decade after the genocide there seemed to be little enthusiasm for such stories in Rwanda. (King 2010).

The first seemingly unambiguous story of a courageous Hutu rescuer to be widely recognized and praised was the story of Paul Rusesabagina. His story was widely told in a popular movie titled "Hotel Rwanda".⁶ Filmed in 2004, it was the first of several dramatic stories about the genocide to be widely distributed and it received much public acclaim outside of Rwanda. The inspirational story of a hotel manager (Rusesabagina) who saved over a thousand lives was an effective vehicle to convey the story of Rwanda's tragedy to millions abroad who were otherwise uninformed. Remarkably many Rwandans, (especially Tutsis) have come to view Rusesabagina as opportunistic, subversive, and a political threat (George, 2006). Since the genocide, Rusesabagina has lived in Belgium and the U.S. where he has been increasingly critical of the Kagame regime. Parenthetically, two other films about the genocide that were well received in the west also got vigorous criticism within Rwanda.⁷

Another relatively early and remarkable rescue story was told by Immaculee Ilibagiza (2006). She was one of seven Tutsi women who were protected by a Hutu Pastor named Murinzi. Her story was widely shown on American networks and public television. The Pastor himself received surprisingly little credit for the survival of the seven women and that narrative was generally not presented as a heroic rescue story.

As of 2007, there were only three stories of Hutu "heroes" that were displayed in the national genocide memorial facility in Gisozi on the outskirts of Kigali.⁸ One fact that has complicated the recognition of individuals who deserve credit for rescuing Tutsis and Hutu moderates is that, countless numbers of rescuers were themselves also participants in the genocide. Throughout the event, ordinary citizens were under intense pressure from friends and local authorities to take part in the looting, manhunts, and violent crimes. Many who wanted to protect Tutsis had limited opportunities to do so. Some who were trapped in the maw of murderous community activities found themselves participating in the killing, fearing that they themselves or their loved ones would suffer if they did not. At other times, the same individuals saw opportunities to save others and did so. Thus, the categories perpetrators, bystanders, and rescuers were not exclusive and many Hutus who opposed the genocide did at times actively or passively facilitate the crimes. Understandably, some of those who did protect or rescue Tutsis will not be acknowledged as heroes. Only those who were never accused or suspected of having cooperated with the genocidaires can qualify for recognition as courageous rescuers.

Slowly, in recent years, more stories of Hutu rescuers

have emerged in print. One collection of narratives was gathered by this author through interviews conducted in the spring of 2007 and summer of 2009. Subsequently several dozen narratives were published online.⁹ There is no one theme that unites all of the stories other than the courage that ordinary people in different circumstances found within themselves when their lives were endangered. It should also be noted that, the succinct summaries of several stories of rescuers below omit details of the terror and suffering of survivors who witnessed the murder of loved ones and experienced horrors such as rape and torture.

Stories of rescue

One of the remarkable Hutu rescuers was a government soldier named Silas, who saved many Tutsis in the town of Nyamata (interview, March 6, 2007). His testimony was later verified by researchers at the National Genocide Memorial facility in Gisozi. Silas took great risks in gathering endangered Tutsis and guiding them through wooded areas during the darkness of night. Silas described how he was inspired to protect innocent people because of his Christian faith. He managed to persuade another soldier who he knew as a member of his Pentacostal congregation to help him in his furtive efforts. Groups of Tutsis were taken to a camp in Burundi where they had a safe refuge. When Silas returned to his barracks after the last trip he was able to make he realized that he was suspected of treason and likely to be arrested by his military comrades. He then fled and barely eluded capture. Following his escape he managed to join a unit of the invading Rwandan patriotic front (RPF) forces. After the genocide, Silas testified against some of the perpetrators in several gacaca trials, despite threats that he would be killed for doing so.

The story of Hadj Bazirake Jumaine in Gisenyi was unique because of the method he used to save Tutsis (interview, April 6, 2007). Bazirake was a Muslim who lived in the city of Gisenyi. His brother had a reputation for being a rabid Hutu nationalist, so he was generally not suspected of pro-Tutsi sympathies. He was able to hide Tutsis, many of whom happened to be fellow Muslims, in his home. He frequently used the family pickup truck late at night to transport those individuals to the neighboring city of Goma, in Zaire (since renamed the Democratic Republic of the Congo or DRC). The people in the truck were concealed in barrels underneath piles of sand that was shoveled on top of them. Hadj Bazirake said there were many other Muslims in the Gisenyi area that cooperated in efforts to save Tutsis, regardless of religion. The story of Yahya Msengiyuma in the Kigali area was another story of a Muslim rescuer (interview, August 9, 2009). It is now one of more than a dozen rescue stories documented at the Gisozi-Kigali Genocide Memorial Centre. Msengiyuma's heroism in saving as

many as 50 Tutsis was confirmed by researchers at the Centre. He testified that he converted to Islam as a young man long before the genocide happened. His parents had raised him as a Seventh Day Adventist Christian but he was influenced by the example of his uncle, whom he greatly respected as a child. Years later when the mass violence broke out in his neighborhood, Msengiyuma secretly took many Tutsis into his home. He sheltered them at great risk for himself and his family. Msengiyuma acknowledged that he had much fear in his heart that he would be killed. He said that he prayed to his maker that if he was killed it would be swift. He also feared that his parents might be killed because of his efforts to save Tutsis.

Religion in the rescue narratives

Muslims then, compare to now, were a small minority in the population. Prior to 1994, Muslims were marginalized to the degree that they were not respected nor were they considered as fully Rwandan citizens in the country. One sheikh called this feeling among Muslims a “Swahili complex” (August 7, 2009 interview with Sheikh M. Yusufu, Remera, Kigali). During the 1994 genocide, some individual Muslims did murder Tutsis but they did so as individuals and they were strongly condemned by other Muslims¹⁰. There is general agreement that, there were no mass killings of Tutsis in mosques throughout Rwanda. No Muslim leaders were implicated in the organized violence. After the genocide, the stories of Muslims who managed to save Tutsis became widely known (Tiemssen 2005). Consequently a significant number of Christians, including Hutus, were known to convert to Islam after the genocide (Wax, 2002; Nduwimana interview August 6, 2009).¹¹ For Hutus who converted to Islam, there was an increased sense of security (Walker 2004). with a fresh sense of identity and association with those who did not participate in the genocide; their chances to evade persecution if not prosecution were improved. To some Muslims, gaining legitimacy in Rwandan society was even more important than increasing their numbers.

In general a significant number of rescuers said that the reason they risked their lives to save others was their religion. In some of the stories published on the internet, priests and ministers courageously intervened to protect civilians who were besieged. Some of them were killed in those efforts. Conversely, in a remarkable number of well documented incidents, Christian clergy betrayed their followers. Some Catholic priests, nuns and Protestant ministers encouraged terrified Tutsis to gather in their churches, where they would presumably be protected. After victims were assembled in those places of worship the genocidaires were encouraged to proceed with their killing, using grenades, guns and machetes. In sharp contrast, among the relatively small numbers of Muslims

in Rwanda there were a disproportionate number of courageous rescuers. In summary, the interviews and stories of otherwise ordinary people who risked their lives to save others revealed a variety of motivations for their courageous behavior. Among the most common stories were tales of Hutus who guided or transported refugees outside of the country or to safe places where they could hide. Another common story was of individuals who hid victims in their own homes even when they knew they might be killed if the hiding places were discovered. The backgrounds and motivations of the courageous rescuers were varied. For some individuals there was little forethought and no consideration of alternatives. Their actions were unplanned and they did what seemed right, given the circumstances. Many Christians and Muslims clearly said they were influenced by their religious principles. Religion may have been much more important as a force that motivated rescuers in Rwanda than it was in Europe during the Holocaust. According to best research on the subject of rescuers after the latter event, only 15% of the rescuers volunteered that they were motivated by their religion (Oliner and Oliner, 1985).

Efforts to disseminate rescue stories to promote reconciliation

It was believed that the use of an interactive blog would allow stories of some rescuers to circulate widely and generate a collective dialogue that would be constructive in promoting some reconciliation within Rwanda. Over a period of one year the response to the blog was limited. Reportedly, in developed technologically sophisticated countries, such as the USA, perhaps one in a hundred among millions altogether, is truly interactive while most are ignored (Quenqua, 2009). Given the extent of poverty in Rwanda and the fact that computers are not readily accessible to many except in commercial and internet facilities, one can rationalize, if not fully understand, the modest response to the blogs with rescue stories. An effort to better understand the problem and to disseminate the stories more widely led to a second round of interviews and conversations with Rwandan officials in July and August of 2009.

Conversations with officials at the National Commission to Prevent Genocide and the Kigali (Gisozi) Genocide Memorial Centre encouraged me to believe that many more Hutu rescue stories will be gathered, displayed and disseminated in the years ahead. Over a dozen are now posted in that facility. Although another agency titled the National Genocide Research and Documentation Centre is being planned, the Gisozi facility is presently the logical place to encourage, coordinate, and publish data related to the collection of rescue stories. The researcher there with the greatest interest and responsibility for that collection is himself a survivor. He expressed his conviction that the rescue stories are indeed a significant

part of the gradual process of reconciliation and that there will be increasing interest in them in the future.¹²

Others expressed similar opinions elsewhere. A more recent sign that the documentation and appreciation of Hutu rescue stories is on the increase, for example, there was a dedication ceremony at Nyanza memorial centre at Kicukiro in July, 2009. At that time, Ibuka ("To Remember") the umbrella organization of Rwandan survivor support groups, recognized and publicized the stories of nine Hutu rescuers and one Italian priest there as "saviours" (Kigali New Times, 2009).

The overall situation in relation to reconciliation is difficult to assess. Government censorship prevents any public discussion of ethnicity. There are significant restrictions on freedoms of speech and expression. Prominent international human rights organizations generally agree that the political regime is authoritarian (Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, 2010). Nonetheless, the regime of President Paul Kagame is often praised in some European capitals and in Washington, DC, for promoting internal security, stability and economic progress in the country. Because of that progress, it is said; countries that contribute aid to Rwanda tend to criticize some practices privately but do not criticize the regime publicly.

Rwanda's responsibility for destabilizing the neighboring country of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) because of its military intervention and support for allied forces has been increasingly recognized and well documented (Reyntjens, 2009). Millions have died there in the decade since the genocide; "tens of thousands including innocent civilians" have allegedly been killed and brutalized by the RPF and their rebel allies (French, 2010). The RPF intervention was initially justified because of cross-border attacks by organized Hutu forces but Rwanda's subsequent involvement in the exploitation of valuable mineral resources in the Congo has also been documented (Prunier, 2009; French, 2010). Covert support to allied Tutsi forces has also been linked to many atrocities and mass rape of civilians in the region. Since much of this is undoubtedly spoken of and known by Hutus as well as Tutsis throughout the region there may be a great deal of distrust and bitterness on both sides unless and until there are more rigorous investigations with increased transparency on the part of Rwanda's government.

Barring dramatic events that cannot be anticipated, Rwanda will be ruled at least until 2017 by the same regime that came into power as the genocide ended. In the most recent election, President Kagame was reportedly supported by 93% of the country's voters (Clark, 2010). Prominent international human rights groups that had long been critical of Kagame's authoritarian practices questioned the fairness of the political process prior to that election (Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, 2010).

Even for the most optimistic observers, there is

agreement that meaningful reconciliation will take many more years. Others are openly skeptical and some even cringe at the use of the word, reconciliation. (Interview with Fr. Jean Baptiste Ganza at Centre Christus in Remera on August 1, 2009). Even more are silent on the subject.¹³ There certainly have been many salient public projects to promote reconciliation.¹⁴ The best known were the extensive judicial efforts to achieve some measure of justice for the worst genocidaires through the UN-sponsored International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) based in neighboring Tanzania and Rwanda's extensive national gacaca hearings, conducted in many hundreds of communities throughout the country. Both of those proceedings are almost now concluded, with mixed reviews. In general there was much dissatisfaction with the costly ICTR proceedings that resulted in roughly a dozen convictions of some of the worst criminals who perpetuated the genocide (Cruvellier, 2010). On the other hand, there is a qualified sense that gacaca was for several years, a reasonable nationwide effort to deal with many tens of thousands of criminal suspects, given the lack of any alternative approach that had popular support. There is, nonetheless, noticeable skepticism about gacaca. Human Rights Watch reported that as of 2009, gacaca cases were increasingly related to government silencing of political dissent and private grievances, rather than events from 1994.

In the schools, there has been much frustration regarding efforts to educate students about the genocide. Despite the absence of any common text that agrees upon and summarizes the country's recent history, there are educational programs encouraging national unity at virtually every level of society. Hutu returnees from military units that were active in the Congo are required to attend so-called re-education camps. There are also, annually, one month, civic education, "Ingando" camps attended by secondary school graduates.¹⁵ Finally, there is a noteworthy, non-governmental effort initiated by religious leaders alternately called the Joint Action Forum or the Interfaith Commission of Rwanda (ICR). The ICR was organized in 2003, and is now a broad based association of Christian and Muslim clerics that provides aid to survivors and prisoners and attempts to discourage ethnic and religious discrimination.

CONCLUSIONS

Citizens identified as Hutu still comprise roughly 85% of Rwanda's population, as they did just prior to the genocide in 1994. Many have benefited from extensive international assistance and the government's impressive economic development programs, but given censorship and limitations on free speech still in existence and it difficult to ascertain the political attitudes of the country's silent majority (Zorbas, 2004; King, 2010). Thus it remains difficult to gauge whether and how significant

reconciliation does occur in Rwanda's complex, post-genocidal society. Are the growing numbers of Hutu rescue stories contributing to a gradual process of reconciliation, although political conditions in Rwanda appear to be stable, the question is difficult to answer. For some individuals, reconciliation may never happen or it may take many more years for it to happen. Clearly there is a steady growth in the number of (Hutu) rescue stories that are being documented and disseminated in several ways. There is no claim here that rescue stories are or must be a central element in the many efforts to promote reconciliation throughout the society. Although it may be impossible to verify, the assumption that rescue stories do help in promoting reconciliation is shared by a noticeable number of Rwandans. For them, it is an article of faith, that gradually and cumulatively the stories can make a modest contribution to the process.

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Endnotes

¹ The regional consequences were also catastrophic. During the decade following the genocide, millions of people were killed in warfare and mass violence in the destabilized northern and eastern Kivu lake region of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). For documentation, see Prunier (2009), Renytjens (2009), French (2010).

² Given the fact that prior to the genocide there was much integration and intermarriage and all spoke the same language, the concept of ethnicity is complex and debatable; nonetheless, the percentage of Hutu in Rwanda's population was then said to be 85% with roughly 14% Tutsi and 1% Twa. During the genocide the indigenous Twa or Batwa (formerly called pygmies) also suffered significant losses relative to their numbers.

³ Remarkably at that time, Jefremovas (1995) estimated that "the bulk of the killing (group) was done by a maximum of 1 to 2% of the population."

⁴ The word reconciliation is widely used in the social sciences with many meanings. In the context of countries recovering from mass violence it can suggest a gradual social process that leads to a stable, relatively peaceful society. It can also refer to efforts on the part of individuals who were directly or indirectly victimized to respect the rights of, if not forgive, members of another group previously considered their enemy. Presumably for many individuals, 'reconciliation' never happens. The term has been widely used in Rwanda since the genocide with a plethora of programs and pronouncements encouraging reconciliation.

⁵ Among them are: JAM International (2003). Whitworth W (2006); Ilibagiza I (2006); Hatzfeld J 2000 and 2005, and Lyons (2006); the latter two suggest a relatively new and chilling genre of "survivor" stories based on interviews with perpetrators of genocide.

⁶ According to Terry George, the director of the film, when it was initially shown to Paul Kagame and other Rwandan officials in May of 2005, it was enthusiastically praised. <http://vimeo.com/3854089>. After the film was released Rusesabagina became critical of the Kagame regime. President Kagame and other officials now disparage Rusesabagina's accomplishments, claiming that the RPF negotiated to save the lives of the civilians who were sheltered in the Kigali hotel. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/05/09/AR2006050901242.html>

⁷ The films *Sometimes in April* and *Shooting Dogs* were also vigorously criticized in Rwanda. The latter depicted a white Roman Catholic priest who chose to remain in the country while the genocide raged, causing Wilson Gabo, a leader of the Rwanda Survivor's Fund (a charity based in London) to exclaim, "There was never a situation, not in that school or anywhere, where a white person refused to be evacuated." www.commondreams.org/headlines06/0417-04.htm It is a matter of record, however, that several non-Africans did stay to resist the killers. The stories of Carl Wilkens, Wolfgang Blam, and Vieko Curic are well documented and are inspiring to many in Rwanda and elsewhere.

⁸ Those who are now publicly regarded as courageous rescuers during the Rwandan genocide are designated by the word "heroes". The documentation of rescues by people designated as heroes is now being facilitated by the Kigali Genocide Memorial Centre in the suburb of Gisozi, which was dedicated in 2004. Implicitly they are understood to be Hutus because publicly identifying individuals by their ethnicity is generally not allowed. <http://www.kigalimemorialcentre.org/survivors/dancilla.php> A documents and library section is attached to the distinguished and informative museum, created with the support of the Aegis Foundation (based in the UK). There is now a growing number of presumably Hutu heroes identified in the gallery exhibit and, reportedly, many more will be added to that collection. (Interview with Freddy Mutanguha, facility administrator, March 9, 2007).

⁹ The web sites are <http://employees.oneonta.edu/conwaypg/rwandablog/> and <http://rwandablog.wordpress.com>.

¹⁰ Interviews with Yahaya Msengiyuma and Sheikh Munyatwari Sudi on 9 August, 2009. According to both, many Catholics have encouraged rumors that Muslims participated in the genocide. They claimed – based on anecdotal reports – that there is a somewhat organized effort to discredit the reputation of Muslims.

¹¹ Sheikh Shaban Nduwimana (Ruhanga/Kigali) stated that there was a 50% increase in members who converted to Islam after the genocide, "because there were so many rescuers" (Interview, August 2, 2009). See also, Wax (2002) who reported that Rwandans have converted to Islam "in staggering numbers, and their numbers have more than doubled since the genocide." It is widely said that Catholics (albeit still a majority in Rwanda) have lost many adherents. Pentacostals as well as Muslims have gained many converts since 1994 but there does not seem to be any reliable statistical source of information on this development. In some contrast to those claims the Rwandan Government reported on November 1, 2006, that 56.5 percent of the population is Roman Catholic, 26 percent Protestant, 11.1 percent Seventh-day Adventist, 4.6 percent Muslim, 1.7 percent claims no religious affiliation, and 0.1 percent practice traditional indigenous beliefs. This study indicates a 6.9 percent increase in the number of Catholics and a 17.9 percent decline in the number of Protestants (which can in large part be explained by breaking out the growing Seventh-day Adventist church separately) from the 2001 survey figures. The figures for Protestants include the growing number of members of Jehovah's Witnesses (about 14,000) and evangelical Protestant groups.

¹² Interview with E Rutagonya, August 10, 2009

¹³ Many of the profound problems first outlined by Zorbas (2004) remain unresolved. Most relevant regarding this research and more recently, see King (2010).

¹⁴ The bureaucratic "top-down" government effort is loosely coordinated by the National Unity and Reconciliation Commission <http://www.nurc.gov.rw/>.

¹⁵ Some critics described the youth civics program as a "concentration camp" for youth, others suggest that there is a good deal of indoctrination at the camps. Well over 30,000 have attended Ingando camps over the last ten years. On the other hand, cynicism and resentment on the part of many Tutsis can also be heard in descriptions of gacaca proceedings as (allegedly) "phony justice" (Ganza interview, 2009).