

# Rwanda

*Zakes Mda*

“Classic justice has failed in Rwanda,” says Gratién Uwisabye, a Tutsi cultural activist who works for Fest’Africa. “We need to explore other forms of justice. There can be no reconciliation between the Hutu and the Tutsi without justice.”

Fest’Africa is an annual literary festival in Lille, France, run by African writers. Fifty African authors, mostly from Francophone countries, participated in last year’s festival. The focus was on Rwanda, particularly on how the memory of the genocide can be preserved through literature and on what role the literary arts can play in bringing about reconciliation. All Rwandan participants were emphatic that the South African route of truth-amnesty-reconciliation would not work in their situation. Justice is a prerequisite for any reconciliation. Amnesty is out of the question.

Uwisabye says officially there are 125 000 prisoners accused of participating in one-way or another in the genocide. At the rate that the trials are going it would take eight hundred years to try them all. There is therefore a need to find new forms of justice. Rwandans are now experimenting with a traditional form of justice called Gacaca in Kinyarwanda (the language of both the Hutus and Tutsis of Rwanda).

When there is a conflict between families or villages in traditional Rwanda Gacaca (pronounced as Gachacha) is used to resolve the problems. It is a participatory form of justice. For instance, if two families have a

dispute they come together to find out the individual responsible for the offence. Every member of the community is free to participate in the proceedings and in denouncing the culprit. The first step of Gacaca is acceptance. The family of the offender must accept the crime. The offender must make a full confession, and must apologise to the wronged family. After examining mitigating factors the family of the offender must take the responsibility of paying compensation to the wronged family. Gacaca is therefore a restorative form of justice. Compensation depends on the nature of the crime and the status of the victim. If, for instance, a murder of a breadwinner has been committed then the family of the offender will pay ten cows or cultivate the fields of the wronged family for the sole benefit of that family for life. In traditional society Gacaca presents an amicable and unconditional reconciliation.

The Rwandans are now engaged in studies and research to determine how Gacaca can be adapted to deal with the genocide. They have started an experimental exercise of Gacaca at the Rilima Prison in the outskirts of Kigali where the prisoners and their alleged victims were brought together. Some prisoners made public confessions of their crimes during the genocide and begged to be pardoned. The next step will be to bring the villagers together to testify of their experiences during the genocide. After this experiment Uwisabye has expressed his reservations about Gacaca’s ability to deal with the more serious cases. Perhaps it can work in bringing to justice those who

collaborated with the killers, say, by giving information, and those who might not have killed anyone but looted from the victims. However those who planned the killings and those who carried out actual executions deserve nothing less than what he calls 'classic justice'.

Fest' Africa hopes to make a contribution to Rwanda's quest for reconciliation. Soon after the 1994 genocide there was great concern that African intellectuals — with the exception of Wole Soyinka - did not react to it. Three years ago a Rwanda edition of the festival was established with the view of breaking this silence. Nocky Djedanoum, a Chadian writer based in Lille who also founded Fest' Africa in 1993, invited ten writers to stay in Rwanda for two months. These writers came from Chad, Senegal, Guinea-Conakry, Djibouti, Kenya, Burkina Faso, Cote d'Ivoire and from Rwanda itself. During their stay they visited genocide sites and memorials and talked with the survivors. They were asked to write something on their experiences if they felt they could. They had no obligation to write anything at all.

After two years all the ten writers had published various pieces of literature — ranging from novels, poetry, biographies and travelogues — based on their experiences in Rwanda. At the end of May this year they presented their books at a seminar in Rwanda. The South African writer, Antjie Krog, was invited to share her experiences of the truth and reconciliation process in South Africa. The Ugandan writer, Goretti Kyomuhendo, who had written a novel on the genocide outside the Fest' Africa process, was also invited.

Last November the ten writers once more presented their work to enthusiastic audiences in Lille and in Paris. They shared experiences of their two months' stay in Rwanda. They feel that in addition to putting Rwanda back on the agenda of the

international community, their books will encourage a new literary movement in Rwanda. The country has no literature of its own. The writers held a number of workshops with prospective writers. Now the Rwandans are able to write for themselves of what happened during the genocide. But what is most important to Uwisabye is that this literature will dispel the denial that seems to take root with the passage of time.

"Some of the Rwandans who committed the genocide have claimed that the genocide did not happen," he says.

Writers who came to Rwanda met the victims, heard their testimonies and visited memorial sites such as Nyamata, Bisesero, Nyarubuye and Murambi where there are ten rooms full of skeletons

"For us it is important not to bury those skeletons so that people can remember," he adds. "Our people must never forget the genocide."

It is the display of these skulls that disturbed Monique Ilboudo, a university law lecturer and writer from Burkina Faso. She says, "Although I understand the importance of making sure that the people do not forget the genocide, I come from a culture where no one is dead until he or she is buried. All these remains are like wandering souls without a rest."

But then even the people that she met in Rwanda were like the living dead. When they have so much to remember memory becomes a burden. She wonders whether these memorial sites with all the skeletons will hamper reconciliation. "When the survivors see these bones every day how can they forgive?" she asks.

One thing that the writers observed was that the people in Rwanda are still divided and very bitter. Goretti Kyomuhendo recalls an

incident where a Rwandan writer, Yolande Mukagasa, read an extract from her work on how her husband, three daughters, one brother and three sisters were hacked down by the machetes of the Intarehamwe, and how she hid for three days among the corpses of her relatives. She broke down and cried. Other Rwandans at the seminar were angry with her. "Yolande," they said, "we are tired of your tears. You behave as if you are the only one who suffered. You personalise your tragedy. You say 'I lost my husband ... I lost my children.' What about the rest of the people of Rwanda? They lost their husbands and their children too."

This, of course, sounded very callous and insensitive, but it showed her that Rwandans have lost all sense of feeling and are still very bitter.

This bitterness is displayed by one of the Rwandan writers, Venuste Kayimahe, who recalled at the Lille meeting how he hid at the French Embassy for two months during the genocide and how his daughter was hacked to death. He declares that the international community has sacrificed the Tutsis since 1959 (when they were overthrown for the first time by the majority Hutus and many of them went to exile in the neighbouring countries). The international community is an accomplice to the genocide, he says.

"This is not a Rwandan genocide," he adds bitterly. "This is a Tutsi genocide because if you call it a Rwandan genocide then the Tutsis don't count anymore."

Jean Claude Gasana, a Hutu academic who is exiled in Belgium — he was not part of the Lille gathering since only Tutsis were there — says it is statements like these that indicate that the present ruling Tutsis are not really interested in reconciliation. Instead they are vengeful, which will only result in a never-ending cycle of violence.

"This cannot only be a Tutsi genocide because Hutus died too," he says. "Tutsis killed many Hutus on their advance to Kigali during the war. They actually decimated many communities. Post genocide times have even been worse. They have systematically killed Hutus at will. The problem is that the international community does not want to talk about this because the Hutus are regarded as genociders (sic) and therefore deserve to die."

Many Rwandans think that there will not be any reconciliation in their lifetime. Beata Umubyeyi is a 22-year-old political science student in Lille. Her father was a white man whom she never knew and her mother a Tutsi. All her relatives were killed in 1994. Only she and her mother escaped. They are now refugees in France. She says she has nothing against Hutus because she was saved by Hutus who hid her during the genocide.

"But there is still anger and bitterness among the Rwandans," she adds. "Even now I am sure when a Rwandan person meets another one she or he asks herself or himself whether the person is Hutu or Tutsi. Reconciliation is a distant dream. Maybe my children will live in a good country. There may be time to take out the hate from our children. But how? I do not think Gacaca will help. Recently my mother went back to Rwanda to search for survivors. She found nobody in the village of my childhood. There are no more people ... no houses ... nothing! Who will participate in the Gacaca there?"

Koulsy Lamko has faith in Gacaca. He is a writer from Chad who came to Rwanda on the Fest'Africa project, and was so moved by the situation there that he decided to stay. He felt that writing a book was not enough. He wanted to live with the people in order to understand new problems after the genocide. He says that the emotions of the people were destroyed by the war. To the

people there death has become banal and many of them have suicidal tendencies since they do not think they have anything to live for. Yet many of them are looking for vengeance. He uses theatre, music and art to make them feel again.

The method of theatre that he uses is very participatory. The members of the community where the play is being performed give accounts of their personal experiences of the genocide. Out of these stories a play is created. The play only poses the problems and members of the audience have to provide the solutions. One such play was presented before an audience of almost two thousand people and lasted for six hours because the audience began to participate and provide solutions. Many people who started with the view that reconciliation was impossible changed and became activists for reconciliation.

Lamko is now based at the National University of Rwanda in Butare. He is working on a play about Gacaca, which has been collectively created by him and Rwandan actors. This was commissioned by the Centre for Conflict Management. Since the government wants to introduce the Gacaca system to deal with some of the genocide cases, they now want to gauge the reaction of the people to the system through this play. The play will use real-life accused and real-life accusers. The government will therefore be able to tell whether the people accept Gacaca or not.

Not all African writers think the activities of Fest' Africa in Rwanda are commendable. Chenjerai Hove, one of Zimbabwe's leading writers, was invited to participate in the project. He turned the invitation down because he did not want to feel like a tourist into other people's miseries and tragedies. He feared the response of the Rwandan people who would say to him, "So you think our experience is stuff for fiction?"

Indeed, Goretti Kyomuhendo — the Ugandan author of the novel *Secrets No More*, which deals with the genocide — was accused by Rwandan intellectuals of fictionalising their tragedy. She was struck by the fact that they referred to it as "our genocide", as if they wanted to hog it and hoard it for themselves and did not want to share it with anyone.

As a writer Hove says he searches for reality in order to transform it into fiction. But the Rwandan situation from the pictures he saw in newspapers and on television was an overdose of reality, which would leave the writer with nothing more to write because there is nothing more to create.

"Emotionally I could not imagine myself standing the sight of ten thousand human skeletons displayed for the public to view for whatever cause," he says. "I think it is obscene to be displaying those bones there. It is barbaric. The Rwandan government is fighting barbarity with another form of barbarity. It is disgusting that somebody did kill those people and that now they have been displayed like museum pieces."

Hove believes that the Fest' Africa writers were being used by Paul Kagame's government for propaganda purposes in his anti-Hutu campaign. Somebody was bound to hijack the writers to write about their own cause, which was not necessarily a universal human cause.

"I understand from those who went this is exactly what happened," he adds. "The president of Rwanda took them to various sites to show them skeletons and mass graves in order to prove how inhuman and horrendous the Hutus are. Now this campaign is an anti-Hutu campaign rather than an anti-Intarehamwe campaign."

If he had participated in Fest' Africa's Rwanda project as a writer he would have contributed to the hatred rather than to

human compassion and reconciliation which must happen for that country to move forward.

The Rwandan government on the other hand is adamant that it is working for reconciliation, hence its attempts to explore

other forms of justice such as Gacaca. It denies that it is whipping up feelings against the Hutus.

Without any meaningful reconciliation the Rwanda genocide is bound to repeat itself.