Telling Rwanda's genocide story

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As April comes to an end and Rwandans enter the final week of the official month of mourning and commemoration of the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi, Eric Kabera, the unofficial national archivist and keeper of the genocide record through film, spoke with *The EastAfrican* on his life and journey as a filmmaker, and how his chosen profession is intertwined with Rwanda's dark history.

Kabera often questions his obsession with the 1994 genocide, considering the trauma, pain, despair, suffering and never ending remorse as to why others died and he lived.

The answer he says is, "my pain, trauma and suffering is nothing compared with that of those who lived through the killings.

He says he does it for the orphans, widow, widowers and all those who lost family members, some even entire families. Then there are the survivors, with physical and psychological scars, lost limbs, homeless, and suffering survivor's guilt and want to know why he bothers to tell their painful stories.

For this, he says; "because I am Rwandan.

Erick Kabera, Filmmaker and CEO of Kwetu Film Institute. PHOTO | KWETU FILM INSTITUTE

His early life

Growing up in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Kabera did not at first understand why there was so much hate against the Tutsi. He lived the hate every day from childhood.

Being of a lighter skin tone than most children his age, he was taunted by being called a "Kazungu," (a small white person).

As far as he can now recall, his family lived in one of the most difficult places to live in, then under the regime of Mobutu Sese Seko. As Tutsi settler community, they were prosecuted and discriminated against but were determined to make DR Congo their home.

Rwanda was openly hostile and had been since 1959 when his father decided to seek refuge in Congo.

The secret service of the Habyarimana regime in Rwanda had infiltrated the Congo, spreading propaganda to the Congolese that the Tutsi living among them were as sly as snakes, not to be trusted and that they were in Congo to take over their businesses and land.

The hate from the Congolese was real, but they had to cohabit with the Tutsi who against all odds, became successful, like Pheneas Kabera, Eric's father.

Kabera senior, with other Tutsis who were once his pupils in Rwanda such as Buzana, the father of Majyambere in Gitarama and Rubangura who became his business colleagues, were well known successful businessmen in the city of Goma.

Kabera senior was a general tradesman who sold paraffin, beer, salt, cars and everything in between. He was charismatic, liked by many and trained many into the trade.

He was well known in Goma where he lived in one big house with his more than 20 children. Kabera senior had been a teacher in Murama-Kubuhanda, where he grew up with the famous Pastor Ezra Mpyisi.

Eric is currently working on a documentary film with co-director Martin Widerberg, on his own journey as a filmmaker but it is turning out to be more about the life and times of his father, at least according to Widerberg. Eric is one of the youngest of the Kabera children.

April 1994

News of the genocide started streaming into Goma in April 1994, and then the refugees followed.

Goma was the place hosting the killers, the dying and then came the French troops with their M16s flying overhead and tanks rolling in to the rescue of the refugees in what was dubbed Operation Turquoise. That is how I witnessed this history.

But this changed one day when a family friend, the late Maitre Haguma Jean, contacted me and introduced me to Ray Bonner, investigative reporter and *New York Times* staff writer, who with other foreign journalists were desperately seeking translators who spoke English and Kinyarwanda.

I met Bonner, and he asked me to accompany him to the refugee camps, Mugunga to be precise. I told him that I was a Tutsi, and the people there had killed my people, so how did he expect me to go there?

He quickly saw my point and said he nevertheless needed help on the ground, in Goma. He asked me to meet him the next day at 8:00am at Hotel de Grands Lacs for a press briefing. He then paid me $40 upfront, half of the $80 daily fee I was to receive working for him.

And that was my official introduction into the world of media and later film. I was 23 years old.

I translated for correspondents from the *New York Times, BBC, CNN, NBC, ABC, France2* and *Rtbf.*

I thought I knew English, having learnt it in school and in Uganda, but here I was struggling to understand British, Australian and the most interesting one, American accents. No one taught me these. I had to come up with my own accent.

As I hanged out with the journalists, I happened to have been noticed by the ring leaders of the suspected genocidaires, namely Barayagwiza, one of the co-founders of RTLM.

Near-death experience

They must have been drawn by my enthusiasm around the pool of journalists. One of militia approached me, and threatened to pull the pin of a hand grenade over my head, accusing me of telling the “Bazungu” lies.

Ngo twarishe sha? Twarishe tubikwereke?

He reached to his waist holster as I was arguing back, and Jean Pierre Valois who happened to be there came to my rescue since he knew what these guys were had done in Rwanda.

He advised me never to respond to their accusations since they had blood on their hands and cared very little for life.

I could have died that day. But the incident emboldened me. I vowed to fight back by translating what these terrifying faces had done in Rwanda.

A few days later, I was hired by an American journalist to travel into Rwanda. It was mid July 1994. We crossed the border in Gisenyi, and were greeted by dead bodies and the smell of death.

New path

I had been planning with my friends to join the RPA, and we had been training every morning by hiking Mount Goma. Then my mother died and I became the head of the family. That was the end of my dream of joining the liberation war. But here I was in Rwanda in 1994 as a civilian with a different weapon, the pen.

The trip took me to Kigali, Nyamata, Gikondo and Nyamirambo. It was an introduction to a hell on earth.

Not even the RPA could direct journalists to the sites of killings. It was overwhelming. We went on our own. We spent nights at the famous Mille Collines hotel.

When we finally returned to Goma, I was accompanied American journalists, and we were flown by a French helicopter into Bisesero in the Kibuye Prefecture of northwestern Rwanda.

Hundreds of Tutsis had fled to a steep forested hillside dotted with caves. There, they resisted Hutu attacks for three months.

Bisesero was not a secret massacre. Not even the presence of the French troops could save the Tutsis who begged the soldiers to stay and protect them, to ensure that the killings would stop.

But the French left the area for three days even while the killers were in sight; coming back only after almost all of the remaining fighters had succumbed to the ferocity and relentlessness of their attackers and were killed.

More than 40,000 Tutsis were murdered in the Bisesero area.

Inside Rwanda

When we flew into Cyangugu, Capt Kanyoni, a senior RPF officer saw me. We were at the stadium where politician Faustin Twagiramungu was being introduced to the people, but the area still harboured remnants of the genocidal forces who were trying to cross into Congo. It was still dangerous.

Capt Kanyoni asked me; "we sha? Urakora iki aha? (Young man, what are you doing here?)

I explained and he told me I was very courageous but warned that it was still very dangerous. I was terrified, and innocently told him I didn't know.

We went back to Goma, and three days later I decided to return to Rwanda to continue the path of recording, translating and sharing what I had seen and heard.

This was the basis of my first feature film, *100 Days*, directed by Nick Hughes whom I had met on my path as translator and fixer.

The work

We had an idea for the film, but could hardly raise funds for production in London, Paris or New York. I finally came back to Kigali and announced plans of making the movie.

We received support and were even offered an office at the Mille Collines, and few tickets from Air Rwanda then being headed by Florence Nkera.

We got rehearsing place at Republika lounge and then approached my friend Kalisa Alfred for money to buy the film stock and Boom. He initially signed for $70,000, at the time, it was a fortune.

Later he invested in the film. Pascal Munyampirwa offered rooms in Kibuye, Ibaliza Ghislain gave us trucks and cars to transport actors to Kibuye. We still did not have money for food or to pay the actors.

FARG, the survivor's fund sponsored us and soon we were ready to shoot after three months of preproduction in 1998. The rest is history, as captured in the yet to be released documentary we are making for release during the 25th commemoration of the Genocide against the Tutsi next year.

With the new generation of story tellers and filmmakers, we feel Rwanda's film industry has come of age to attract government, private sponsorship, NGOs and even individuals.

This medium belongs to us all. We need to support it. All aspiring film makers need support, however small. As President Paul Kagame said, "the story of the Rwandan film industry is the story of Rwanda itself."

With very little resources Rwanda has produced a number of internally acclaimed films in the past two decades.

It may have not been easy to record the tragic history of the Genocide against the Tutsi, but it has been worth the effort.

I am inspired too by the work of Steven Spielberg who founded the Shoah Foundation whose footage and testimonies from the survivors of the Genocide (against the Jews) was used by students of the University of Southern California, to make short films.

I have presented most of my work through Shoah Foundation at this college.

If we don't tell our stories no one will.

In Summary

Background

- Eric Kabera is a Rwandan filmmaker, founder and president of the Rwanda Cinema Center and the Kwetu film Institute.

- He was born in the former Zaire, now Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), where his father sought refuge in 1959 following ethnic killings in Rwanda that targeted the Tutsi.

Although his nucleus family was living in the DR Congo during the Genocide against the Tutsi in 1994, he lost 32 members of his extended family on both the paternal and maternal sides who still lived in Rwanda.

- It was this personal loss that inspired him to make the feature film *100 Days* in 2001 and a documentary titled *Keepers of Memory* in 2004. The documentary has real voices of victims and perpetrators of the genocide who Kabera interviewed.

100 Days, made in collaboration with British filmmaker Nick Hughes, was the first film shot in Rwanda after the genocide and was also the first feature film on the subject. Other films such as the Hollywood-funded Hotel Rwanda followed.

- *100 Days* is special because it has professional actors. Kabera used actual Tutsi and Hutu survivors and it was shot on location in Kibuye at the actual sites where killings occurred.

- Although Kabera set up the Rwanda Cinema Center to train filmmakers, since 2005, the centre has been better known for organising the Rwanda Film Festival. Nicknamed "Hillywood" because of Rwanda's terrain that earned it the nickname "Land of a Thousand Hills," the annual film show is more of a travelling festival.

- Because Kabera wants to reach a large an audience as possible, the festival is held outside Kigali on a rotational basis and the films screened, especially those made by Rwandans are shown on large inflatable screens in rural areas throughout the country.

- More recently, Kabera has set up a film and television training school, the Kwetu film Institute, which is supported by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences and the German government with training provided by the Deutche Welle television station.

Kabera says the institute and the festival will be exploring other social issues affecting Rwanda.