

BOOK REVIEWS

Valleys of silence into the Rwandan genocide

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The valleys of silence into the Rwandan genocide is a narrative on the Rwandan tragedy in a journalistic style. Wende, the author went to Rwanda during the genocide to work on a documentary for the BBC's Panorama programme on Rwanda, a country which was almost unknown from Western media at that time. In an attractive style, he takes the reader from his city of Johannesburg, South Africa to the Rwandan darkness of 1994. He keeps leading the reader through the historical and horrendous events mixed with topographical description of different places he crossed to deflect attention of that tragedy on that beautiful place of the African Great Lakes region.

What lies behind dreadful choices that people in Rwanda made in 1994? The first reason for this critical question the author was searching, he found that in part it was history and choices made by politicians and their consequences. Three "tribes", Hutu, Tutsi and Twa started moving and settled in the region between 1000AD and 1400s. Although they were living peacefully, a brutal "feudal system" was forced on majority Hutu who were obliged to work for Tutsi "overlords". The Belgians exploited the historical difference between the two groups, ruling through the Tutsi *Mwami* (king) and his "lords". The author condemns the Belgians who classified people by "ethnicity" and requested people to carry identity cards with ethnic classifications. He disapproves these humiliating and ridiculous categorizations in as much they were based on facial features, length of the nose, the number of cattle owned and argues that this division was done in the Belgian interests in order to exploit the people and the land.

According to the author, the generally accepted version of Rwanda's history is that when the Hutu started their uprising in the 1950s, after the King Mutara Rudahigwa's death and the murder of Hutu chiefs, Belgians supported Hutu due to the increasingly nationalistic, anti-Belgian Tutsi stand. Independence was achieved after Tutsi massacres by Hutu and others fleeing to Uganda and neighbouring countries. Internal Tutsi became politically impotent and discriminated. When militant Tutsi attacked Rwanda from outside, innocent internal Tutsi were massacred and this 'ethnic' cleansing led others into exile. It is this generation of these refugees who would later form the nucleus of the Rwandese Patriotic Front (RPF) based in Uganda.

The author wonders why after independence Hutu continued the system of "ethnic" classification. His view is that, first, they would have been influenced by myths showing Tutsi domination over Hutu and secondly Hutu leaders were seeking support from their majority group and to keep considering Tutsi as scapegoat of all problems. He also mentions problem of land in Rwanda whereby the density was 262 people per square kilometre, added to high birth rates with an average of 8.6 children per woman. For the author, "Rwanda was in part a Malthusian apocalypse – real nightmare of what an overpopulated world could face". When the presidential jet was grounded, the killings started by targeting people on hit lists mainly Hutu and Tutsi politicians. The author notes that "most analysts are convinced that the missile that brought the plane down came from the nearby barracks of the Presidential Guard." Some people argued that Tutsi were killed because RPF had killed their President. In the meanwhile, "the UN had been forced to stop its efforts to preserve civilians in Kigali because of the increased fighting there." Its soldiers witnessed the holocaust and did nothing because of the decision taken by their superior.

Wende visited different places with tangible evidence of Tutsi extermination such as Nyarubuye in the Eastern region of Rwanda where approximately 4,000 Tutsi gathered to seek refuge resisted to Interahamwe, but one day later they were almost all killed due to the intervention of the army. In addition to this extermination, the effects were enormous and horrendous including the difficult life of Tutsi refugees, many orphans and some of them were mutilated. The effects that he identifies include the deflation of infrastructure by RPG rockets, psychological trauma, massive migration of Rwandan refugees into neighbouring countries, and the devastation of the country by the uncontrolled RPF soldiers who killed religious leaders in Kabgayi. Some of the evidence in the book includes pictures taken by journalists showing, for

instance, orphans, the weapons that were used during killings, census forms with ethnic classification, genocide memorial, Tutsi survivors protected by the UN troops, refugee camps in Tanzania which give valuable information on the genocide and its consequences.

A striking aspect of this book is the role played by Sylvain Nsabimana, the then Prefect of Butare, who managed to protect orphans who were in Ecole Sociale de Karubanda and escorted them till Burundian border. Another group of Tutsi was protected near his office by a group of army officers. By asking the important question about how everyone would have reacted during the tragedy, the book not only shows the challenges of being an activist against evil but also is an interpellation for everybody to question his/her decision. It gives an opportunity to teachers and students to think about the role of learning genocide. In fact, it is not only to know the sequences of events but also to understand how to resist propaganda of hatred and become human rights activists by protecting others' lives as was done by Sylvain Nsabimana even if he did not manage to do it consistently during the whole crisis.

The book raises other information such as the high number of Tutsi killed in Butare, the description of threatening Interahamwe on their roadblocks, some comparison of the Rwandan case with examples from the Holocaust and the South African case. It points out the importance of breaking silence and telling the truth for true reconciliation as a way of healing Rwanda.

By analysing the roots of Rwandan tragedy, the *Valleys of Silence into the Rwandan genocide* is a good teaching aid for young learners who want to know what happened in Rwanda in 1994 in a journalistic text easy to read and understand. However, the use of some terms in this book is problematic. For example, in some places, the word massacre was chosen instead of genocide. The author preferred to use the term "Rwandan genocide" instead of "genocide against Tutsi". The term "Rwandan genocide" was first used by the UN and implies that all Rwandans were targeted. In reality, with the exception of the beginning when political leaders were killed, for the rest of the period, the Tutsi were the victims.

Furthermore, medieval terms such as lord or feudal do not describe exactly the Rwandan clientship system where the patron and client had a voluntary contract. Another term, tribe, used for Hutu, Twa and Tutsi is itself contentious and seems also displaced for Rwandan case. Some researchers prefer to use social groups/classes because a person could shift from one class to another due to different factors. The Tutsi domination mentioned in the

book seems to undermine the participation of other social groups in the ruling of the country during the pre-colonial period as at the top of one district there were three chiefs from all social groups. The identification of the actors in the grounding of the presidential jet also remains a controversial issue, even though the author was careful not to mention anyone.

With regard to migrations which peopled Rwanda, the author seems to accept the settlement of the population according to phases, which is also rejected by some historians basing on archaeological findings and lack of evidence of migrations in “ethnic” terms. The whole document which is not paginated does not give any bibliographical information. In this regard, different statistics mentioned are questionable. It is the case of 100,000 Tutsi killed in Rwanda in 1959 upheaval comparatively to low statistics given by other sources. The author also mentions the killing of several Hutu leaders in 1959 as an immediate cause of the upheaval while, in fact, only one was beaten. Neither does he show his sources for the number of Tutsi killed in Butare (even though the number 250, 000 is not very questionable) or the population density in the 1980s. Surprisingly, the information given by people he met from time to time corroborates some written documents. One may be tempted to think that they were either constructed by the author or his informants were trained to answer in that way. Despite the mentioned gaps, Wende made an effort to identify some key issues behind dreadful choices that people in Rwanda have made in 1994. This book can help both teachers and learners to understand the complexity of the Rwandan situation and more importantly for teachers to help their learners to think about the choices they make in life.

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