

The Bishop of Rwanda

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Chapter One

The Tragedy

It was late. Sefa was the first to hear them coming. Peter, her husband, had long since extinguished the torches that lit their hut. But there was light flickering from under the doorway and she could hear angry voices outside. “Peter,” Sefa whispered. “Are you awake? Do you hear them?”

“I hear them, Sefa. Go back to sleep. It is not our concern.”

“What about what our neighbor Antoine said? Could it be the militia?”

“I told you that is rubbish, Sefa,” Peter replied. “The government is not going to allow such a thing—kill every Tutsi in Rwanda. It’s ridiculous!”

“But they are angry about the president.”

Peter sighed. “What do we have to do with the death of the president? Such people are always angry. Go to sleep.”

But then there was a loud banging on the door and a harsh voice shouted: “Open up, you bunch of cockroaches!”

Peter instantly got out of bed and stood facing the door. “We are sleeping. Come back tomorrow.”

There was a loud cracking sound and the door to the hut shattered in pieces. Several men carrying machetes and clubs stood grinning hideously in the torchlight. One of them stepped inside. It was Ndanguza, their neighbor from up the hill. He glared at them. “But there will be no tomorrow for the cockroaches.”

Sefa ran over and picked up the baby while Peter quickly pulled on his pants. Their two sons, Jacques and Edward, awoke and stared fearfully at the intruders. There were several men inside their hut now, moving toward Peter. He stood up and held out his hands as if to plead with them. “What is this, my neighbors? Do you not know me? We have lived together in this village—”

One of the men brought his machete down hard on Peter’s outstretched arm, nearly hacking off his hand at the wrist. Sefa screamed, but then three men grabbed her and threw her down on the bed. They began tearing off her clothes. She saw two other men attack her boys while the others chopped at Peter as he lay bleeding on the floor of the hut.

Two men held Sefa while a third raped her. She tried to hold on to the baby but another man took [him](#) and swung [him](#) by [his](#) feet. It all became like a dream—a terrible dream. Sefa stared at her oldest son’s severed foot lying on the ground; she couldn’t see the rest of him. As the men changed positions and a second man was on top of her, she looked at her husband. There was blood everywhere and he was twisted in a strange position. Then she realized his head had been chopped off. His eyes were still open, but they were vacant.

The man on top of her grunted loudly and another took his place. She looked at him. It was Nemeye, her neighbor. Last week she had shared some milk with him and he had given her some new straw for the floor. But Nemeye’s eyes were glazed over now. He looked like a madman. Then out of the corner of her eye she saw a torch. They were setting fire to the hut. She tried to move but they still held her fast. Then the man holding

her baby yelled to the man with the torch and to Sefa's horror they lit the baby on fire. She screamed and the man on top of her punched her hard in the face.

Sefa awoke hours later. Her aunt and uncle were carrying her through the bush. Her entire family had been murdered and her home burned. Hate consumed her.

I will tell you the rest of Sefa's story later. I realize that beginning with such a harsh description may be hard for some readers, but you must understand that this particular story from the genocide is relatively mild.

Tribal Conflict?

Unfortunately, most of the world is misinformed about the genocide in Rwanda, dismissing it as a civil war or a tribal conflict. Nothing could be further from the truth. The extremist political parties Paramahutu and MRND, which controlled the government of Rwanda since the country's independence in 1962, plotted and planned for years the genocide of the Tutsi people.

They were not responding to a crisis situation or civil unrest. There was no civil war. There were mass executions of a particular group of people. Mass executions that were greatly assisted by a major world power and that the rest of the world chose to ignore.

Preconditions for Genocide

Sociologists tell me that all the preconditions for genocide were present in Rwanda—a small tightly controlled land area, a disciplined and orderly population, effective propaganda and communications, a lethal ideology that fostered the necessary hatred, and a well-organized army or militia. Ironically, some of these things are good things.

Rwanda is a small country. Before the Belgians colonized us, the country was quite large, but huge sections were given to the Congo and Uganda so that Rwanda would be easier to control. And Rwanda was easier to control. That was part of the problem.

Rwanda always has had a disciplined and orderly population. In general, most of our people just want to provide for their families without any trouble from the government or anyone else. They tend to obey those in power because the last seventy-five years taught them that to question authority only leads to pain and suffering. But what about when that authority is wrong? When that authority is ordering you to commit heinous acts of violence against a great many people, some of whom you know are totally innocent?

If you were a peasant in the Rwandan countryside in 1994, you obeyed the government. You assumed they knew more than you, for they were learned men with college educations and great power.

The greatest cause of the genocide was the Hutu's hatred of the minority Tutsi people. The best way to understand such hatred usually is to examine the differences between the two groups. Alas, that is the single greatest error made by those trying to understand the Rwandan genocide. There were virtually no differences between the Tutsi and the Hutu in Rwanda that were not manufactured by forces outside of the country.

The reason for this is simple. Hutus and Tutsis lived in peace together for five hundred years. During that time they intermarried so much that the physical appearance of a modern Rwandan is a blend of both groups. Some books written about the genocide have tried to imply that one can easily tell Tutsis and Hutus apart. That would be like going to America and saying that you can easily tell an Irishman and a Norwegian apart.

Like America's ethnic mix, there are few, if any, pure-blooded Hutus or Tutsis in Rwanda.

Five hundred years ago one could have found differences. The Tutsi, for example, were much taller and thinner. The Swahili word for Tutsi is *Watusi*. The average height of a pure-blooded Tutsi in the early 1900s was close to seven feet. There are old films showing Rwandan kings visiting Belgium in the thirties, wearing elaborate feathered headdresses and robes and towering over everyone.

Pure-blooded Tutsis have thinner noses than pure-blooded Hutus. Some even think that the similarity of the Tutsi nose to that of the white man is one of the reasons the Belgians chose to favor them over their Hutu counterparts when Rwanda was first colonized. Pure-blooded Tutsis are also slightly darker than Hutus and their hair is straighter than the Hutus. But being taller, darker, having smaller noses and straighter hair is just the stereotype. Even before intermarriage with the Hutus, many Tutsis were shorter with broader noses.

My point is that you can't tell a Tutsi and a Hutu apart by physical appearances. I am a Tutsi, but when visitors ask me whether I am Tutsi or Hutu, I ask: "Which do you think I am?" They almost never get it right. I am of average height and have lighter skin and somewhat of a broad nose. Stereotyping a person is always unwise, but during the genocide many tall, dark complexioned men died because of their appearance.

Rwanda, like most African countries, is a patrilineal society. Our ethnicity is determined by the line of the father. A person could have pure-blood Hutu ancestry on his mother's side and a very mixed Hutu-Tutsi ancestry on his father's side, but as long as the father is considered a Tutsi, the child will be considered a Tutsi as well.

What is so ironic about the genocide in Rwanda is that people had to use government issued identity cards to recognize the persons they were supposed to hate and kill. The government spent a great deal of time and money issuing identity cards in the years prior to the genocide for just that purpose. Yet amidst all this propaganda-inspired hatred, very few realized that if there had been clear differences between the Hutu and the Tutsi, they would not have needed the identity cards.

The government of Rwanda performed the genocide because of a deep hatred their generation had for the Tutsis. But that hatred was not tribal based. [The](#) Hutu and Tutsi are not different tribes. Different tribes speak different languages, live in separate areas, and have different customs. The Hutus and Tutsis of Rwanda speak the same language, have lived side by side for centuries, and have the same customs and traditions.

I was surprised when I visited a Chicago museum in 2003 and noticed that according to a map of Africa, Rwanda had three languages—Hutu, Tutsi, and Twa. (Twas are pygmies and make up less than 1 percent of the population.) This is how bad the tribal misconception has become. Since people think we have three tribes, they assume we have three languages. We are not different tribes, but different ethnic groups who lived together in peace for more than five hundred years.

Then the Belgians colonized Rwanda. [They applied the](#) old European method of divide and conquer, [to make](#) Rwanda easier to control. So the Belgians kept the Tutsi king and made the Tutsi chiefs taskmasters over the Hutus and the common Tutsis and had schools teach that Tutsis were superior. They claimed the Tutsis were descended from Ham, Noah's son in the Bible, and that they had ties to the ancient Egyptians and

other “noble” people. The Tutsis began to believe this and the Hutus became downcast, began to feel inferior, and their resentment began to build.

In the late fifties, the Tutsi king began to object to the way the Belgians treated the Rwandans. The Hutus and the Tutsis were forced to build roads and provide crops for the Belgians in what amounted to slave labor. The Tutsi king abolished this servitude and applied to the United Nations for independence. The Belgians had the king killed and staged what became known as the “Hutu Revolution.”

There was no revolution! The Belgians took the ruling power from the Tutsis and gave it to the Hutus in the hopes that this would forestall Rwanda’s push for independence. The maneuver did not work, however, and the Hutus also pushed for independence. Pressured by other colonial nations, the Belgians gave in and Rwanda gained its independence in 1962.

But that did not undo the damage. While the Hutus and Tutsis lived together in peace in villages across the country, the Hutus who had been “educated” by the Belgians still had deep resentments for the Tutsis whom they began to refer to as “cockroaches” and with other demeaning terms. The new government denied the Tutsis many things, including decent employment and education. But that was not enough.

The government began to talk about what they called the “final solution,” which meant eliminating every Tutsi man, woman, and child. The Hutu extremist government was dependent on the aid of France. They asked France to help them acquire weapons and to train their militias in more effective methods of torture and killing. The government assumed that if France helped them, neither the United Nations nor any of

the superpowers would stop them from performing a national massacre. And they were right!

Now, after one million, one hundred and seventeen thousand deaths, the international community has apologized to Rwanda repeatedly. Some of these apologies are real—backed up by actions. Some of the apologies were just “good politics.” God does not play politics. God has always loved Rwanda, even in its darkest hours. I believe that He is going to show that love by making an example of our country. Here is a poor African country, ripped to pieces by hatred and unfathomable cruelty, which I believe God is raising up as a shining example of what happens when a nation turns its heart to Him.

Someday soon I believe that the world will call Rwanda greatly blessed.