

*A small light
as we walk
this long road:
The work of Ibuka*

An interview with Kaboyi Benoit

Kaboyi Benoit is Executive Director of Ibuka, the national survivors' organisation in Rwanda. In the following interview, he describes how Ibuka supports the survivors of the Rwandan genocide, seeks justice for those who were killed, and honours their memory. This interview took place in Kigali, Rwanda. Cheryl White and David Denborough were the interviewers.

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Could we start by hearing about the history of Ibuka, the history of your attempts to respond to survivors of the genocide here in Rwanda?

Thank you so much for visiting us. Ibuka means 'remember'. We remember genocide and its consequences. Our organisation was created by survivors one year after the genocide and we represent survivors across this country. There are four key themes to our work.

The first is *justice*. How can survivors find justice for their relatives? More than one million people perished during the Tutsi genocide in Rwanda and we have a mission to seek justice on their behalf. We support survivors to collect testimonies; we assist them to be involved in trials whether these are in the community, in national courts, or the international tribunal. There are many obstacles on this road to justice, so we continue to be like a small light to survivors, a small light as we walk this long road.

The second theme involves *memory*. How can we document and memorialise our history? Those who were killed have rights to be known as human beings, to be remembered, to be honoured. We do this in many ways. We document the names of victims and support survivors in burying their loved ones. Even now, twelve years on, there are many victims who have not yet received dignity in burial, so we try to redress this. We also organise national and international events in which people from around the world come together to remember what took place here, and what took place in other genocides. For instance, we work in partnership with a holocaust survivors' organisation in New York. And some people have come to our events from as far away as Australia. Aboriginal people from your country, who have been victims of human rights abuse, have visited us to talk about the Tutsi genocide. We join with each other in memory.

The third theme involves *supporting* genocide survivors. We provide counselling to survivors, we assist in building shelters and housing, and we develop income-generating projects. We have a team working around the country to take care of survivors who are traumatised, who need support, who may be suicidal. We try to sensitise survivors about how they can take care of their relatives, their family members, and themselves.

Finally, we seek to play a key role in *peace-building*. As victims of mass killing and genocide,

we have to be the ones who support a vision of tolerance and peaceful cohabitation. As victims, we have to do our best to see how harmony can be restored in our hearts and minds, in our communities, in our cities, and in our country.

Can we ask you more about memory? You mentioned that the name Ibuka means 'remember'. There are so many different forms of remembering and memory. I imagine the remembering you are speaking about involves honouring and dignity, and much more ...

As survivors, we have to remember our relatives. I think Almighty God chose the name Ibuka for us and everyone is very proud of this good name. We remember not only the genocide but also the survivors, also Rwanda, and also all human beings.

Each year in this country, there is a national week of commemoration of the genocide. But for us, at Ibuka, we use one hundred days for this commemoration. Every year, over one hundred days, we organise meetings, conferences, debates about the issues. We also visit widows and orphans and care for those who are still alive. Action in the present is a form of commemoration.

I know that you are involved in responding to trauma in your country, but here in Rwanda, the suffering is complex. Imagine if the one who is suffering also has to cross every morning the killer of their father or mother. Or if everyday they have to see the one who raped her? You can see we are facing many challenges.

It is difficult for us to comprehend these challenges. But, since we have been here, we have also witnessed many ways in which those in Rwanda are reclaiming their lives from the events of twelve years ago. We drove south yesterday and saw how most of the people here live with very few material resources, but it seemed as if Rwanda has rich cultural traditions. Are there ways in which Ibuka builds upon certain Rwandan cultural ways, certain cultural traditions?

Of course, our people know how to live with suffering. In our culture, even if we are suffering, we find ways not to lose our integrity. Our motto in Rwanda is to struggle for life and not to lose our hope, or our way of living. Even at our lowest moments, we remember that the one who made us to be saved is still with us.

Resistance is a way of living here. If you read the history of Rwanda, every time there were wars, we were very brave. This is not to say that we love war, but we tried to save our loved ones, our security. We sought to defend ourselves even if we were suffering. There are ways of living, and ways of thinking about life that we draw upon in difficult situations. In fact, during times of life and death we start to see things clearly. Certain traditions of our people become all the more significant to us. Even if we are suffering, we use our cultural values of resistance.

There are also different ways of remembering. We do not remember in order to destroy our lives. We remember in ways that are in accordance with our culture, that assist us to face life.

Can you tell us more about your peace-building work?

Every activity we engage in involves peace-building. In every meeting, every discussion, we think about how our work can contribute to people living in harmony in this country. This relates to counselling work as well. When we are counselling those who were traumatised in 1994, we must do so in ways that ensure they do not continue to think it is still like 1994. While there may still be harassment and some killings of survivors, it is not like 1994. Even if people are still suffering, we try to make sure they don't think in the old ways. If victims turn to revenge, then this can be profoundly dangerous. If survivors respond with hostility and violence, then this country would never recover. So, we promote values of harmony in all our work. We are travelling in the direction of peace. Perhaps in five to ten years, the younger generation will think in new ways. We wait for this day.

Did I understand that you were saying there are still murders of survivors?

Yes. In some ways the genocide continues. There is a long history in this country of hatred. There are no longer the generalised killings as there were in 1994, but there are still killings. If survivors testify against those who were involved in the genocide in 1994, there are sometimes killings to prevent their testimonies. The logic of the genocide is still alive. We do not lose hope, but we are not naive either. Fortunately, those who wish to see good things occur

in this country are more powerful than those who wish to continue the killings. We at Ibuka are not soldiers, we are not politicians, but we are committed to defending our country. We are committed to defending our country's future, a future free of killings and violence.

We went to Bugesera yesterday and we were overwhelmed by what we saw there (see box on p.50). We will never forget it. The young woman who was working at the memorial site lost her entire family at that place. I am trying to imagine what the people who were lost would think about the work that you are doing now, the work of Ibuka and all the others who are trying to honour their memories ... what would they think of the ways in which you are now trying to be their voice ...?

First of all I will tell you, even if it is not an answer to your question, I am one of the fruits of what you saw at Bugesera. I am a result of that history. I was there. My family, my friends, cousins, neighbours were killed there. I am a part of that history, a part of that memorial. It is a part of me.

I suffer enormously if I see someone visiting the memorials and not paying respect to the ones who are there, to the victims. When I see this, I struggle to comprehend. The ones who died, they were just like us. We could be them. The blood in our veins is the same blood of my mother. My mother was there, my father was there. But even if they were not my father, mother, cousins, neighbours, and my friends, they would still be human beings just like me and you.

Look at us today. You are from Australia far away. I am a Tutsi, educated in French. And yet we are sitting here together in compassion. When people come from other countries to visit our memorials, to respect them, this is important to us. Even if you were not here during the killings, on the days when our families were killed, you are coming now to learn more about us, to support us.

We do our best to maintain these memorial places even though some say that these memorials are against unity and reconciliation. We say there can be no reconciliation without history. In Eastern Europe, whenever they could, the Nazis burned and destroyed the crematoriums where they had been killing the Jews. Few of the sites remained after the war. Here in Rwanda we have a chance to preserve the places

where the killings took place, to honour those killed, and to ensure that no-one can ever deny this history. And this history is not just for Tutsis. It is not just for Rwandans. This history is for all human beings. It was not only us who lost in this genocide. The whole world

lost. It was a crime against humanity. We maintain the memorials here, not only to sustain our story but to maintain the human story.

Thank you Benoit.

BUGESERA MEMORIAL SITES

South of Kigali, two churches have been turned into memorial sites. When the killings began, people sought sanctuary in these places of worship. They huddled together in prayer and in hope that in these places they would be protected. They were not. Time and again the local padre collaborated with those doing the killing and places of sanctuary became places of death.

When you first enter the quiet Nyamata Church the light pours through small holes in the roof. It takes some time to realize these are bullet holes. Clothes from twelve years ago have been kept to invite visitors to remember those who wore them, those who witnessed their loved ones being killed by their neighbours, before they too were murdered.

Behind the church it's possible to walk through the tombs. It is dark but in the half-light you know you are walking through rows and rows of skulls, and bones piled upon each other, metres high.

At Ntamara church the buildings are made of bricks that have been shaped from local mud. They are a deep red colour and quite beautiful.

In one room are the possessions that people brought to the church when they were seeking safety. You can stand amidst the cups and saucers, knives and forks. It is an intimate space. There are water containers which women would have carried on their heads. And there are suitcases. These people obviously knew that they would not be returning home for some time. They were seeking sanctuary.

In another room, the bones of the deceased are muddled together. Who knows how many people they belonged to. Thousands of people were killed here. There are so many different sorts of bones. What do you call a collection of bones? What words can be found to describe this?