

We should all weep and feel ashamed

I walked out of the building numbed. Looking back now I am surprised that my legs were even able to carry me. My eyes were glazed; my arms limp at my sides. I wasn't the only one. Brave young men tried desperately to hold back their tears, and failed miserably. Experienced adult men broke down and wept; one broke out in a sweat minutes after we had entered and twitched nervously as it dripped off his face.

Chief muftis of a number of African countries shook their heads in mourning and invoked Allah's Mercy. The former Libyan ambassador to Rwanda, who had witnessed the 1994 genocide, cried as the memories flooded back.

We had just walked out of the Kigali Memorial Centre, established this year, ten years after the holocaust that had devastated Rwanda, in memory of the 1 000 000 lives lost in 100 days of slaughter.

Perhaps it was the last room in the Centre, the Children's Memorial, that had done it for many of us. Happy pictures after happy pictures of children that had been murdered, with five or six line biographies. Fabrice, 15 months old, 'killed in Muhoro Church'. Yves, 3 years old, 'hacked by machete'. Ariane, 4 years old, 'stabbed in the eyes and head'. Two-year-olds, 'smashed against a wall'.

The Centre is a powerful reminder of what had happened in this city and in this country; and of what has happened elsewhere – to Native Americans as victims of European colonisation, to Armenians as victims of Turkish arrogance, to Jews as victims of Nazi herrenvolkism; to Bosnians as victims of Serb supremacism; and of what continues to happen today – to Kashmiris as victims of Indian nationalism, to Palestinians as victims of Zionist fundamentalism.

Set up with the assistance of Aegis, a British trust, the memorial is located in the Gisozi district of Kigali, the site chosen for the mass burial of 250 000 victims. It is a sophisticated and sterile memorial, with multimedia presentations of the genocide – unlike some memorials in other towns whose raw power is in their featuring of piles of skulls and skeletons.

Rwanda is a beautiful land of rolling green hills and mountains highlighted by forests and lakes, intersected by rivers and punctuated by earth-coloured buildings. Despite the red that coloured the landscape in 1994, it remains mesmerisingly attractive – the stuff of artists' inspirations.

Its people go about their business with diligence, and even though the poverty is stark, crime is virtually non-existent – a fact that might be difficult to appreciate when one remembers that not long ago Rwandans killed more than a million of their own people in three months.

We five South Africans that visited the Memorial were attending a conference of the Union of Muslim Councils (UMC), with Muslim community leaders – mostly national muftis – from 27 African countries.

Having been fed for years on the notion of African tribal rivalries, we were surprised to discover that, despite popular opinion, there is actually only one 'tribe' in Rwanda. One tribe, one language – Kinyarwanda, one history. So what about the Hutu and Tutsi 'tribes'? There are no such things! The Hutu-Tutsi identities as they existed in the 20th Century were creations of Belgian colonial authorities.

The land was colonised by the Germans in 1895 and handed over to Belgian occupation in 1916, after the First World War (or the First European Tribal War as Malcolm X preferred to call it), by the League of Nations.

By the turn of the 20th Century, the terms 'Hutu', 'Tutsi' and 'Twa' were class classifications which could change with circumstances. The Belgians converted these into 'racial' categories and reflected these in identity cards they issued. The arbitrariness of this 'racial' categorisation is reflected in the policy that anyone with 10 or more cows in 1932 – and his descendants – was regarded as Tutsi; anyone with less than 10 was a Hutu. A minority of the new Tutsis were then favoured by the Belgians with jobs and status, resulting in a great deal of resentment among the rest.

From before independence in 1962, there was already a backlash against Tutsis, with organised massacres taking place from 1959. Some 700 000 Rwandans were forced into exile – including to South Africa – between 1959 and 1973 because of the Belgian-encouraged ethnic cleansing. After independence, Hutus dominated politics and successive post-independence governments – mostly fascist in a single-party state – entrenched the divisions and the persecution of Tutsis. With the corporate-engineered collapse of coffee prices in the 1980s, the economy deteriorated and Hutus tightened their economic control.

The Belgians' divide-and-rule strategy didn't manifest only with the Hutu-Tutsi divide. Muslims were identified as a separate group – whether Hutu or Tutsi. Swahili Camp in Kigali bears testimony to this. It was created to intern Muslims. Camp residents were only allowed out with written permission and no non-Muslims were allowed in. It remained a poverty-stricken ghetto until after 1994.

In 1990, President Juvénal Habyarimana formed the notorious Interahamwe, the Hutu youth militia which, four years later, was to lead the anti-Tutsi genocide, together with the extremist media and the church hierarchy – both Hutu-controlled. Between then and the 1994 genocide, eight major anti-Tutsi massacres took place.

The Arusha Peace Accords in 1993 between the government and the liberation movement, the Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF), was to lead to a democratically-elected government. But the government and the Hutu elite were not interested in peace. Plans were put into place for the final extermination of Tutsis. Death lists were drawn up in advance; 1 000 Tutsis must be killed every 20 minutes.

And all through this, the western world supported the government with aid – including a huge arms package from the French in 1993. By 1994, despite numerous warning signs and appeals from UN forces on the ground, the UN refused to respond to the genocide waiting to happen. The US blocked a resolution for UN forces to be sent in; Kofi Annan instructed that no action be taken.

On 6 April 1994, as South Africa prepared for our first democratic elections, the Rwandan holocaust began. For 100 days, 10 000 people were killed every day, 400 every hour.

And the world watched, complicit in our silence. We watched as one million people were massacred. As many more were raped, tortured, mutilated, orphaned. As neighbours killed neighbours. As 20 000 people were slaughtered in the Nyarubuye church. As Tutsi women were systematically raped as a weapon of genocide. As children were forced to kill their friends and neighbours. As the country's infrastructure was devastated. As, suddenly, 85 000 children became heads of households. As the humanity of us all: the victims, the survivors, the perpetrators and the witnesses from afar, diminished.

The Rwandan media, controlled by extremist Hutus, and the Church hierarchy supported the genocide. The media spurred on the Interahamwe. Church leader participated. In Nyange, Father Seromba gave the order to bulldoze his own church on top of his own congregation of 2 000 people.

But there were many Rwandans who endangered their lives in order to restore our humanity. People who hid, protected, saved others at risk, often giving up their own lives in the process.

And foremost among these were the Muslims of Rwanda.

Today, when Muslims are maligned all over the world as terrorists, when Muslims fight to save their lives and their honour, we can take pride in the struggles of the Muslim community of Rwanda 10 years ago.

Shaikh Hassan, an 'alim that I met in Kigali, told me how his mother had hidden 10 Tutsi families in her home, saving their lives.

Yahaya Nsengiyumva saved the lives of over 30 people by hiding them in his outhouse. One survivor recalls being chased by Interahamwe, knowing she would die 'any second', banging on Yahaya's door and being given sanctuary because, she remembers, he said the Qur'an says: 'If you save one life, it is like saving the whole world'.

When, in Nyange, Father Seromba gave the order to bulldoze his own church on top of his own congregation of 2 000 people, Muslim 'ulama in Rwanda were encouraging unity and protecting Tutsis, trying to stem the terrible tide of the genocide.

It is no surprise, then, that entire villages have been, over the past few years, converting to Islam and leaving the Catholicism brought by the Belgians, the same Belgians who divided the Rwandan nation and set the scene for 1994.

And, it is no surprise that the new transitional government, headed by former RPF guerrilla leader Paul Kagame, appointed a Muslim woman to head the country's Unity and Reconciliation Commission.

But Muslims were not the only ones that acted with honour and integrity. Frodouald Karuhije has dug a trench in his yard to hide from the RPF because he believed they would attack Hutus when they invaded Rwanda. Instead, when the genocide began, he hid 14 Tutsis in the trench, put planks, banana leaves and sand over it and planted sweet potatoes on top.

A prominent Hutu that paid with his life – and that of 11 family members – for protecting Tutsis was Jean-Marie Vianney Gisagara. He was the burgomaster of Nyabisindu. He convinced the councillors not to support the genocidaires. And when the Interahamwe attacked Tutsis in his town, he mobilised the town's police force to drive them away.

Damas Mutezintare Gisimba took in 400 orphans and refugees and rescued people thrown into mass graves.

Today, many Rwandans gets particularly irritated when asked whether they are Hutu or Tutsi and refuse to answer.

This year, as the world celebrates 10 years of South African democracy, attention should also be paid to 10 years of reconstruction in Rwanda. Ten years of building homes, trying to develop the economy, addressing the poverty problem. The world is quick to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the Rwanda genocide; not many people highlight Rwandan reconstruction over the past 10 years.

When we walked out of the Memorial Centre and Saleh Habib, the Chief Mufti of Rwanda and now chairperson of the UMC, told me to read a statement to the media, I felt foolish. What could I say, no matter how well crafted a statement, that could sincerely express our response to what we had just witnessed? And so, as I nervously wiped the sweat from my brow, it was a hollow, dull reading, an inadequate attempt to articulate to a brutalised people how deeply their brutalisation had affected us and how very significant their experiences are to all of us that call ourselves human.

There were no smiles on the faces of the muftis as we boarded the buses. Our future journeys would be profoundly influenced by this mass grave, this memorial to the worse-than-animal in all our breasts, ready to emerge if we allow it to.

*na'eem jeenah
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