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Filming Rwandans' Efforts To Heal

By NANCY RAMSEY (NYT) 1025 words

Anne Aghion made her first documentary, "The Earth Moved Under Him: A Portrait of Managua," in Nicaragua's capital in the mid 1990's, more than 20 years after its devastation by an earthquake.

"Smack in the center of the city was this huge lot with carcasses of buildings, little shacks and this lush tropical vegetation that had grown after the earthquake," Ms. Aghion recalled. "People were living there. It made me wonder, How do you go on after so many layers of destruction? There was the Somoza dictatorship, the earthquake, the Sandinista revolution. How do you survive? How do you pick up after a cataclysm?"

In November 2000 Ms. Aghion went to Rwanda to ask similar questions of a country of eight million people coming to terms with the 1994 genocide, which took the lives of at least 500,000 ethnic Tutsi and moderate Hutu over the course of 100 days. (Alison Des Forges, an adviser to Human Rights Watch and a leading expert on the killings, said that the commonly used figure of 800,000 deaths was too high.)

Ms. Aghion went from the capital, Kigali, into the countryside of rolling green hills and subsistence farming to "a gorgeous place, high up on a hilltop" where nearly a thousand people had gathered for a preliminary step of the community-based system of justice known as gacaca (pronounced ga-CHA-cha). The word means "grass" in Kinyarwanda and refers to the notion of justice on the grass. With more than 100,000 cases to be adjudicated, the government had turned to a system that was used to settle disputes between neighbors in precolonial Rwanda.

Ms. Aghion filmed as a charismatic prosecutor with a regal bearing ran the proceedings. Prisoners were presented one by one. Anyone who had an accusation against the prisoner was invited to speak; if no one spoke, the prisoner was freed.

"At one point a woman with a baby on her back came out of the crowd and spoke to the prosecutor in a low voice," Ms. Aghion recalled. "After she finished, he addressed the crowd. 'This woman has allowed me to tell you that during the genocide this man sequestered her for days on end, that during the day he would go out and kill, and at night he would return to rape her.' "

"Nobody gasped," Ms. Aghion said. "In Rwanda you can have huge crowds and silence. Rwandans are disciplined, respectful of authority and able to remove themselves from their emotions. That's why genocide worked so well. People did what they were told to do."

Tomorrow night Ms. Aghion's "Gacaca: Living Together Again in Rwanda?" will be shown in Manhattan at the Gramercy Theatre (127 East 23rd Street) in a weeklong series of documentaries, "Sundance at MoMA: Illuminated Voices." It will also be shown in June at the Human Rights Watch International Film Festival at Lincoln Center. "Gacaca" was filmed largely in April 2001 in the Ntongwe district, two hours by car south of Kigali. The film follows the prosecutor Ms. Aghion met the previous year as he explains to groups of people how gacaca will work and presents various prisoners to the assembled crowds; away from the groups, individuals speak to the camera.

Referring to a particular prisoner's return to the community, a father asks, "If he returns, can I accept him when he killed my six children?" A young man recalls witnessing his father's murder and running to the marketplace: "They were killing people, but I couldn't find anyone to kill me."

Euphrasie Mukanwemera recounts in horrifying detail how her baby was grabbed off her back, flung to the ground and beaten to death. Annonciata Mukanyonga's children were murdered. "Leave her," she heard the killers say, "she is sadness incarnate, she will die of sorrow."

Ms. Des Forges, the adviser to Human Rights Watch and author of "Leave None to Tell the Story: Genocide in Rwanda," said: "What I find extraordinary about Anne's film is that she stayed around and listened long enough. The kind of attention that Rwanda has received after the genocide has been dominated by people who came from the outside, who formed quick judgments about good guys and bad guys."

"Gacaca" has been shown in many places -- the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard; on French, Swedish, and Finnish television; and perhaps most significantly in a little church in Ntongwe.

A hundred people showed up for that screening. Among them was Annonciata Mukanyonga, the mother who was left to "die of sorrow" by her children's killers.

"She was the one for whom it was most difficult to tell her story," recalled Ms. Aghion, 43, who lives in New York. "While we were filming, she kept telling us, 'Come back tomorrow, come back next week.' One day I more or less said to her, 'Do you want to tell your story or not?' And she sat down and talked."

In the film she tells of trying to flee, of witnessing the mass killings. "Looking out on the hills, you could think that they were just cutting banana trees," she says. She speaks briefly but eloquently about the process of reconciliation, about how Rwandans are already feeding and educating the children of those who killed. "After the screening, as Annonciata was leaving the church, I went over to her and asked her what she thought of the film," Ms. Aghion said. "She told me, 'It was difficult for me to talk about what happened, but now I understand why I did it.' "

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