

“Icyaha ni gatozi?” – The relentlessness of genocide deniers

There is a resurgence of denial of the genocide against the Tutsi, which is gradually morphing into a security concern not only for Rwanda but for the geo-strategic calculus in the region. At the heart of this resurgence is a young, well-educated cohort of descendants of genocide perpetrators – whose political mobilisation revolves around JAMBO ASBL, an organisation of the offspring of genocide perpetrators living in Belgium but recruiting all over Europe, Australia, the United States, and Canada – who have come of age 27 years after the genocide and are out to cleanse their forebearers of the responsibility for genocide. This much is well understood. However, the verve with which they have taken up this mission is what perplexes everyone. They are relentless. It is as if their own lives and those of their own offspring, not just those of their killer parents and grandparents, depend on it. Well, in a way, their lives do depend on the legacy of their forebearers. Here’s why.

In the classic western sense of criminal justice, an individual (not a group) is held culpable for an offence of the penal code. This concept has been adapted in the Rwandan sensibilities as “icyaha ni gatozi.” This means that one’s culpability cannot be ascribed to another in any way. However, it is well known that during the genocide, the leaders told the ordinary people to participate in the killing en masse and that if many of them were involved, no one would be held accountable. This was an effort to decentralize individual culpability. The Gacaca justice system attempted to confront this logic by individualizing criminal responsibility. A list of perpetrators was drawn, and three categories were established based on the level of responsibility: a) leaders

who organized the killings, b) ordinary people who killed, and c) those who only looted property.

The severity of the punishment was supposed to follow that logic. The architects of the genocide, Category 1, were tried under the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) and were supposed to receive the harshest punishment, although some inexplicably had their sentences reduced for “good behaviour” leniency under Judge Theodore Meron of the Tribunal’s residual mechanism following the closure of the ICTR. Some suspects in Category 1 were tried in Rwanda’s conventional courts, while ordinary perpetrators in Category 2 were tried in Gacaca courts. Many in Category 2 remain in jail, although some have been released under the prerogative of presidential pardon due to health reasons and old age, or following their completion of community service known as Travaux d’Intérêt Général” or TIG. Category 3 offenders were ordered to pay civil reparations.

Holding Hutus hostage

Jambo ASBL is committed to preserving the logic of their forebears as a means of concealing individual responsibility under collective self-defence: “if everyone is accused, no one – especially their forebearers – will be held to account.” They interpret justice for the genocide as persecution of a community. In their rhetoric of cleansing their forebearers of criminal and moral responsibility for genocide they invoke the nostalgic past of the pre-genocide period despite claiming that their innocence is due to the fact that they were either too young then or hadn’t been born.

They share this nostalgic desire of [returning Rwanda to the “glorious past.”](#) In this way, they share the political ambitions of political entrepreneurs who have tended to [criminalize the Hutu as a group](#) as a means of accessing political power. They have done this by mobilizing people based on ethnic sentiments and attempting to rally them around

a myth of common persecution/suffering by suggesting that what is criminal is being Hutu when, in fact, the criminals are the perpetrators of the genocide and its deniers. In other words, Jambo kids and political entrepreneurs seek to hold the entire ethnicity hostage by conceiving it as a human shield for their private interests – shielding the forebears from criminal responsibility by means of which they access political power.

“Iso ni nde?”

In the African conception of life, the individual’s life has meaning only in relation to others. This is the idea behind the Ubuntu philosophy: “I am, because you are.” In African metaphysics, heaven and hell are here on earth. Those who have lived a life dedicated to a purpose greater than themselves, to the community, are fondly remembered when they “die.” A person of integrity never truly dies because they continue to exist around us within the spiritual realm. They are looking after those they left behind in the physical realm and continue to bless them with good luck. All blessings to an individual and the community is a result of the ancestors.

It is those who have lived a callous life that “die.” They are quickly forgotten and they are responsible for all bad luck that befalls the community. Moreover, they bequeath this bad fortune to their offspring, who are viewed in the community with suspicion and without credibility until they undergo a cleansing exercise to restore the goodwill of the community. For this reason, a crime is never an individual affair; depending on its gravity, it could have wide-ranging negative consequences beyond the present life.

This is why the most important question an African can be asked is “who is your father?” or its variant, “to whom do you belong.” An African who is asked this question knows that the answer to that simple question is most likely either going to open or close the door of opportunity. As you prepare to answer you know our ancestors are about to bless or curse you.

It is almost possible to predict one's fortunes. Now imagine the significance of the question "Iso ni nde? or "Uri uwande," in a community that was befallen by the tragedy of genocide. The anxiety activates instincts for self-defence.

This is the challenge of fighting genocide denial. Although the criminal responsibility for genocide was determined in the western juridical sense of individual culpability, the perpetrators who are still alive know what they have done to their offspring, and the latter know that although they have no crime to answer for as individuals in the western sense, they still face issues of trust and credibility in the community.

This is the challenge of fighting genocide denial. The creativity and passion involved in inventing new ways of distorting the record of genocide have to do with the perception that their credibility – and suspicion – in the community, that of their offspring, and that of the generations after them, depend on it.

The currency of forgiveness is truth

In the African tradition, a cleansing ceremony is organised for those who seek to restore or recover the trust and credibility of the community. If the offender dies without having undergone this ceremony, it is organised for his offspring so that they are freed from his offenses to the community in order for them to qualify for its good fortune. Indeed, it is also considered to be uncivil to continue to ascribe infamy to those who have undergone this cleansing exercise and have restored their credibility in the face of the community that now no longer views them with suspicion.

Therefore, denouncing the genocide ideology by affirming the truth around it serves a double role. It protects one from the crime of genocide denial. Second, and most importantly, it frees one from carrying the burden of the criminality of his

or her forebearers. In other words, the community's trust and credibility – both the community of the offended that includes all Rwandans and that of victims who are the survivors – are restored under both forms of justice and accountability.

The alternative that evades the truth and seeks protection in denial is worse. The offspring of genocide perpetrators know that in addition to having to evade the justice system for perpetuating the genocide ideology, the question “iso ni nde” remains a haunting prospect, which explains their anxiety that they attempt to deal with by compounding the original problem: embracing the ideology of their parents. This commits not only them to the crime in the traditional sense but also prepares them to bequeath the same burden to their offspring to whom they commit a vicious cycle that rekindles the metaphysical association to criminality.

Rather than embrace the ideology of their forebearers, they should rather embrace the truth as the “currency of forgiveness.” This choice breaks the vicious cycle and commits them to a virtuous circle as credible and trusted members deserving the community's good fortune.