

Gatumba

Hall, M. (2014). Gatumba. Gatumba Massacre 10th Anniversary Memorial, Banyamulenge Community Association, Manchester.

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To mark the tenth anniversary of the atrocity at Gatumba refugee camp is to insist on the political specificity of the event: that it should and could have been prevented, that everyone in the camp on August 13th should have been equally protected; that governments and international organizations should have acted decisively to bring justice to the dead and closure to those left behind. In particular, to commemorate Gatumba is to insist on the continuing urgency of ensuring human rights for refugees, whether in Congo and Burundi, or here in Britain.

To come together with the Banyamulenge community is to insist on respect with the humanity of face-to-face engagement. In doing this, Gatumba ceases to be an unexceptional place in the centre of Africa, and becomes a marker for the circumstances of refugees everywhere, and for a future in which such atrocities cannot be ignored, or allowed.

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Keynote, Gatumba Massacre 10th Anniversary Memorial

Martin Hall August 2014 <http://martinhallfacilitation.org>

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Human Rights Watch carried out an immediate investigation and later in 2004 published a report on the massacre, based on the accounts of witnesses and survivors. Here are extracts from the report:

The refugee camp is situated less than a mile from the military and police camps, just beyond the edge of town on the main road towards the border. Located next to the road, the camp included one cluster of large tents, fourteen of them green, one white, on one side of a field. Some one hundred yards away and facing them, was another group of twenty-four large tents, all white. Each tent was a dormitory housing several families. Between the tents, on the fourth side of the square and facing the road, was a row of latrines and showers. Beyond them was a football field and a marsh stretching to Congo, dry enough to cross easily at this time of year.

The attackers came across the marsh from the direction of the border. At least one witness actually saw some of them cross the border; other attackers apparently joined the group on the Burundi side of the frontier. One of the attackers fired an initial shot at a distance, perhaps as a signal to others in their group. Then they moved towards the refugee camp, playing drums, ringing bells, blowing whistles, and singing religious songs in Kirundi.

Most of the attackers wore military uniforms, either camouflage or solid green, but a few were in civilian dress. Most carried individual firearms but they also had at least one heavy weapon. A number of the combatants were child soldiers. According to a survivor of the massacre, some attackers were so small that the butts of the weapons they were carrying dragged on the ground. There were women in the group, encouraging the others by their songs and shouts, and ready to assist in carrying away the loot.

The attackers, usually only two or three at a time, ripped open the tent flaps and slit the sides of the tent. Often they stayed at the entrance to the tent and either ordered people to come out or just began shooting into the tent. They then threw or shot incendiary grenades that caused the tents to catch fire. Most victims died by weapons fire or by being burned to death. Fifty-one of the corpses of adults and fifteen of children had been burned. One survivor reported seeing an attacker stab a woman to death, probably with a bayonet, and several of the dead had received blows from machetes.

About an hour after their arrival the attackers left, heading back in the direction from which they had come. They carried away loot from the camp, particularly valuable items like money, radios,

and clothing, but they did not stop to take cattle from the nearby enclosures. As they made their way across the plain in the direction of the border, they again sang and made music, a sound local residents followed until it died away in the distance.

Remembering Gatumba is vital to survivors, families and community here in Manchester and at other places where the Banyamulenge diaspora is found. Similar commemorations keep memories of other atrocities alive, whether in Latin America, Bosnia, Sri Lanka or at the centenary of the slaughter of the First World War. And in joining with the Salford Forum for Refugees and the Banyamulenge community in our city in commemorating the tenth anniversary of the Gatumba massacre, I want to make two observations that apply here but also more generally.

The first observation is on what can be called “the burden of tribalism”; the assumption that traditions are inherent – hard wired – pre-determining a range of behaviour from decorating pots, to marriage customs to a propensity to kill members of other communities. This was long an assumption in the colonial anthropology of Africa, but it’s found elsewhere as well; the belief that some groups of people are driven by “ancient hatreds” that are inevitable had caused the United States and Western European countries to hold back from intervening in the Bosnia crisis that had erupted in 1992.

The burden of tribalism took a particularly sinister turn in 1994 with the genocide in Rwanda. In a compelling reassessment, Bartholomäus Grill, writing for Der Spiegel on the twentieth anniversary of the Rwanda genocide, recalls his own reading of the emerging news from Rwanda in April 1994:

The first reports from Rwanda, 4 000km away, were confusing: accounts of military showdowns, bloody unrest, ethnic squabbles and fraternal strife. Der Spiegel published a story that spoke of "anarchy that feeds on itself". Rwanda was dismissed as a typically African conflict.

"Rwanda?" a British colleague said. "Oh, it's just the Tutsi and the Hutu smashing each other's heads in. It's never-ending tribal warfare."

The murderous excesses had nothing at all to do with "tribal warfare". The Hutu and the Tutsi have shared language, customs and culture for centuries. There were mixed marriages, and many Rwandans were unable to tell whether someone was Hutu or Tutsi. The causes of the tragedy were different: the pressures of overpopulation in a small agricultural country, the struggle over scarce resources, colonial segregation policies that had fuelled latent racism between the ethnic groups and the ruling elite's thirst for power.

Today, we know that the genocide was not the work of archaic, chaotic powers, but of an educated, modern elite that availed itself of all the tools of a highly organised state: the military and the police, the intelligence services and militias, the government bureaucracy and the mass media. The Hutu killers were no demons but the henchmen of a criminal system. They pursued a simple logic of extermination: if we don't wipe them out, they will destroy us.

The genocide in Rwanda was to continue for one hundred days, with at least 800 000 dead.

Similarly, the massacre at Gatumba ten years later was not the ethnic inevitability of Hutu rebels killing Banyamulenge Tutsis. This was a politically motivated attack, in the context of conflict that had been going on for fifty years. The breakdown between Congolese factions and the Banyamulenge originated in the 1964 rebellion led by Pierre Mulele after the assassination of

Patrice Lumumba three years earlier. The Banyamulenge were accused of not supporting the rebellion, resulting in violent reprisals in February 1966, when all the men in the villages of Kirumba and Kahwela were decapitated. Sporadic violence continued, significantly exacerbated by the Rwandan war of 1994 and the complexities of the subsequent peace process that was still being negotiated in 2004. These conflicts, and the massacre at Gatumba, could have been prevented by regional and international political action, and the deaths avoided by appropriate policing, as the Human Rights Watch report makes clear.

Given the Rwandan genocide of 1994, and Gatumba and other atrocities a decade and more later, it should not be necessary to insist that violence is the inevitable consequence of social identity and tradition. Whether in Bosnia, Rwanda, Burundi or Congo, we have convincing evidence of the ways in which particular and contingent sets of interests drive the political processes that can lead either to extreme violence or, if understood early enough and well enough, can be dealt with through negotiation and mediation. And yet in Gaza, Belfast, Ukraine, Sri Lanka and other contemporary hot spots, we still hear the assertion that it is inevitable that certain people will want to kill one another because it is in their blood, and has always been in the blood of their forebears to do so. And so one reason for coming together to commemorate what happened at Gatumba ten years ago is to re-assert that this massacre need not have occurred; that there were ways that the lives of 164 people could have been saved in the night of 13 August 2004, and should have been saved; that future massacres like this should not happen.

My second observation is that, in our world today, commemoration is becoming more and more difficult. This is not because the record of Gatumba – or of similar atrocities elsewhere – is disappearing. It is rather the opposite; that the traces of what happened on August 13 2004 are everywhere, and will persist for ever.

Commemoration is a form of mediation; between the past and the present, with a view to the future. Those who commemorate do so with respect; for lives lived and lost in the past, for those living more closely with the consequences of history than themselves. When commemoration is for something extreme – here for the 164 people killed at Gatumba just ten years ago – the need for respect is all the more urgent. And where respect is won for commemoration – and awareness widened through this process of mediation – then the risk of similar atrocities in the future diminishes, even if by just a little.

There is no respect in the traces of Gatumba that circulate, and multiply, today. We rightly celebrate our digital world, while thinking far too little about its dark side. Google Images brings an instant mausoleum to any screen, a morgue of images of bodies twisted in death, burned corpses, bloodstained clothes. Faces are never concealed, bringing unimaginable pain to survivors and families. At the same time, there is no forensic compensation – no utility in these jpeg files and text fragments as evidence against perpetrators. All these circulating and multiplying digital fragments are open to manipulation, to be photshopped, edited or falsified to align with the political claims that, in the case of Gatumba, were being made within days of the massacre.

These persistent, circulating digital traces also enable easy disavowal, the abrogation of responsibility. John Berger long ago showed, in a brilliant analysis of photojournalism in the Vietnam war, that shocking images of violence can encourage superficial responses rather than a political determination to address the causes of continuing conflict. Outrage, he pointed out, might prompt a donation to a charity or a letter to a newspaper; meanwhile, the war continues. Today, there are so many digital images of violence circulating and multiplying across the Internet that atrocities merge into one another as the sordid aftermath of killing in Burundi and Sri Lanka, Gaza and Ukraine, of torture and degradation in Abu Ghraib or Guatanamo. We are

outraged, but helpless under the weight and prevalence of this dark, virtual world. This devaluation of evidence – to paraphrase Hannah Arendt, the banality of digital images of evil – devalues the power of evidence. For while the grainy images of death at Gatumba causes obvious distress to survivors at memorials such as today's – for those with no direct connection with the specific event, they merge into a visual morass of twisted bodies, severed limbs and cheap and torn clothing that could be from one of a dozen killing fields in different continents. And this, as John Berger, noted leads to forgetting in a swirling sea of evidence.

This is why commemoration – an event such as this – is so important. To mark the tenth anniversary of the atrocity at Gatumba refugee camp is to insist on the political specificity of the event: that it should and could have been prevented, that everyone in the camp on August 13th should have been equally protected; that governments and international organizations should have acted decisively to bring justice to the dead and closure to those left behind. In particular, to commemorate Gatumba is to insist on the continuing urgency of ensuring human rights for refugees, whether in Congo and Burundi, or here in Britain.

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