

# IJAMBO: “Speaking Truth” Amidst Genocide

by  
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Discussion Paper D-30  
July 1998

The Joan Shorenstein Center  
**PRESS • POLITICS**



▪ **PUBLIC POLICY** ▪

Harvard University  
John F. Kennedy School of Government

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# INTRODUCTION

It has become common among journalists and press critics to bemoan the “decline” of foreign news reporting in the post-Cold War era. Repeated studies have shown low (and declining) levels of interest among American audiences for such news, and—with the disappearance of the “Communist threat”—a corresponding decline in journalism’s willingness to commit resources to cover such news.

Around the world, fewer major papers maintain fewer foreign correspondents in fewer locales. While CNN alone among US broadcast outlets has bucked the trend, most Americans still rely on the three major networks, all of which increasingly rely on “parachuting” in journalists to troublesome corners of the world for brief stints when conflict or disaster emerges.

Nowhere has this been truer than in Africa. Dubbed often (and smugly) in recent years “the basket case” among the world’s emerging economies, in fact ever since the *New York Herald* contrived to send Sir Henry Stanley up the Congo in 1866 on a trumped-up quest for a “missing” David Livingstone, the images of Africa—and the serious attention paid it by the American press—have changed little.

There have been exceptions: in the early 1900s, public outrage focused for a time on Belgian King Leopold’s vast inhumanities in the immense Congo; in the late 1930s, Haile Selassie of Ethiopia was anointed a plucky hero facing Mussolini’s Fascist armies; in the early 1990s, the extraordinary life and political fortunes of South Africa’s Nelson Mandela ushered in for a time a new attention (and new optimism)—one that, while it has not quite disappeared, has nonetheless been undercut by the steady stream of suffering and mayhem that the Western press has made the norm for the continent’s news.

Nowhere in recent years has that pain and misery been more visible than in the tiny adjacent Central African nations of Rwanda and Burundi, with the ethnic genocide which befell their people in the early 1990s. What follows is a remarkable story, though not about the familiar workings (and failings) of Western-style “parachute” journalism thrust into a world it can barely grasp, let alone interpret. Instead, it describes first-hand the experiences of a local African journalist who tried not only to uphold his profession’s traditional standards of objectivity, but to reconceive the role of journalists in a horrific situation.

From 1993 to 1997, Burundian journalist Alexis Sinduhije saw intimately the murderous consequences of his countrymen’s genocidal passions, passions that took hundreds of thousands of lives (including dozens of his own relatives). Succumbing to neither despair nor cynicism, he tried valiantly to cover the swirling tide of homicidal mania around him, while searching for ways that journalism could help stem the bloodshed, even while remaining honest to its duties to report the news fully and objectively.

Eventually, with the help of a young American, who had come to Africa to help build a new kind of “public media,” Sinduhije and a few others created “Studio Ijambo,” a regional radio service new in Central African experience.

Crucially, they focused on constantly recreating for their listeners the human dimensions of the consequences of civil war. The voices broadcast were those of innocent civilians, who spoke simply of their suffering, of their hopes for peace, and the chance to return to their homes. As listenership grew, so did Studio Ijambo’s reputation for integrity and fairness. For their efforts, several of Alexis’s fellow journalists were murdered; Alexis himself fled into exile for a time. But Studio Ijambo never stopped broadcasting—and over time, it acquired an international reputation, providing coverage for the BBC, Voice of America, and others.

In the fall of 1997, Alexis was invited to Harvard as a Shorenstein Fellow, to reflect on his experience and its implications for the scores of other conflict-ridden regions of the world, where local journalism is ultimately called upon at its best to do more than simply “report the news” as if covering a city hall meeting in a nation at peace.

There are no simple answers at the end, but Alexis does leave us with a set of questions—about journalism’s role in a changing Africa, and the potential aid Western governments, foundations, and news organizations could give in helping the continent enter a new century with new hopes. Whether those hopes will be fulfilled—or dashed once again—remains the most profound, and arresting, question we as Alexis’s readers must ultimately help answer.

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## IJAMBO: “Speaking Truth” Amidst Genocide

by Alexis Sinduhije

### Dilemma and Frustration

I was born in Kamenge, a northern district of Bujumbura, the capital of Burundi. Like most of Bujumbura’s residents, my father came from the rural area of Karuzi, in the center of the country. His whole family, including brothers and sisters, lived there. I am a Tutsi and a journalist, but most of my neighbors in Kamenge were Hutu. We Tutsis were a small minority, and so I grew up in an integrated environment. But that is gone and now our country is in ruins. This is the result of a cycle of violence that has left over 200,000 people dead since 1993.

For me as a journalist, the cycle began all in one moment on the night of October 21, 1993 at two o’clock in the morning. The army, dominated by a Tutsi majority, attacked the palace of President Melchior Ndadaye. Ndadaye was Burundi’s first Hutu president and had been democratically elected, in sharp contrast with his Tutsi predecessors, who had seized power through military coups. At around two o’clock that morning, mortar shelling and automatic weapons fire woke the entire city of Bujumbura. I got out of bed and began making phone calls. Nobody knew what was happening. I was working as a reporter for the state radio station, Radio Burundi, and had just begun to work as well as news editor for an independent weekly called *La Semaine*. I made a few more calls, but still got no reply.

I said to my wife, Diana, that I thought it was either a military coup or an attack by members of Palipehutu, the radical Hutu party that had been banned from the recent elections. When I turned on the radio, there was no sound. I knew then that it was a military coup. With great difficulty, I convinced my wife that I had to go cover the story. After a lengthy discussion she finally let me go. As I left my house, I saw that our Hutu neighbors were also awake, and tense with anger. Many looked at me full of hate. I understood that the situation was going to degenerate into violence, but I didn’t know how bad it was going to be. The soldiers going back and forth in their tanks were Tutsi like

*Alexis Sinduhije was a Fellow at the Shorenstein Center in the fall of 1997. He is a journalist in Burundi who works at Studio Ijambo, an independent radio production studio.*

me, and they had attacked a Hutu president whose fate was unknown.

One of my childhood friends, a Hutu named Gashira, saw me and asked, “You Tutsis, why are you so arrogant? We elected our president and your soldiers killed him.” The question troubled me. It is true that I had brothers in the army, but I wasn’t responsible for their actions. I was surprised and afraid at how ready he was to include me among those who were responsible.

Over the next few days, everywhere emotion took hold of reason. In the eyes of the Hutus, the Tutsis were guilty. I hadn’t really answered Gashira’s question. Although we were of different ethnicity, we both lived in the same neighborhood, one of the poorest in the capital, so I couldn’t see why he spoke of arrogance. But he had told me of the president’s death, so I felt, as a journalist, I had to go confirm it. I headed toward the palace. It wasn’t easy because the army had blocked all traffic and the Presidential Palace was more than 6 kilometers from Kamenge. I decided to walk.

After more than an hour, I reached a hotel called the Source of the Nile where foreigners stayed and which was adjacent to the Presidential Palace. Troops were everywhere. Thanks to a soldier I knew, I got access into the palace courtyard, where I found a group of soldiers pillaging the house. They had already emptied the presidential refrigerator, and were drinking and celebrating. They asked me if I wanted some champagne. I replied that I never drank before sundown and it wasn’t yet midday. One of them told me that I was missing a unique opportunity to taste champagne. We all burst into laughter. Champagne is the drink of the rich in Burundi, and then only the extremely rich. They had a point. They had raided the president’s residence to drink it.

The palace roof was riddled with holes, windows were shattered, and the southern walls surrounding the palace were destroyed. “That was from a shell fired from a tank,” the soldiers explained to me, laughing. I asked if there were any dead among the president’s bodyguards, and they burst out laughing again. They replied that the bodyguard was comprised of soldiers, and that they wouldn’t fire upon their colleagues, but that they had wanted to capture the president. They confirmed that they had done so and

that the president had died at 10 A.M. in a military camp in Musaga, 6 kilometers south of Bujumbura.

I knew that the president's death would have grave consequences. I remembered what Gashira had said to me, but now I pretended to support the soldiers' act. In reality, deep down inside, I hated them because I thought of the thousands of Tutsis who would end up paying for it. I was convinced that the Hutu officials in the countryside would pit the Hutu peasants against the Tutsis. Then soon after, I learned from military sources that the situation was, in fact, turning catastrophic. Hutus were massacring Tutsis in several provinces of the country. They were exacting revenge not only for this but for 1972, when Tutsis had murdered 200,000 Hutus to repress a Hutu uprising against Tutsi dominance.

I began to worry about my father's family in central Karuzi. All of the roads out of Bujumbura were now dangerous, and it was almost impossible to travel to the sites of the massacres. Two weeks later I was able to get out with a group of foreign journalists to Kibimba, 80 kilometers away, where a Hutu schoolmaster had ordered peasants to burn 80 of his Tutsi pupils. Many others had been killed as they tried to flee. Survivors accused the local Hutu intelligentsia, including the administrator, agricultural experts, and clinic workers of having incited the peasants to shoot. One of the survivors gave us this testimony:

That morning, when the radio station stopped broadcasting, the head of Rutegama district and the agricultural experts organized a meeting and told our neighbors that Tutsi militia had killed the elected president. We were sure that after such an act, it would be our turn to be killed, and that those who would do it would be our neighbors, the snakes. Without being able to say it, they were talking about us, the Tutsis. They said, "Get machetes, spears, hoes and get to work." Mpawenimana, who was with the people who had killed my children, he and I shared a beer yesterday evening.

The reaction of the peasants demonstrated even more to me the level of ignorance among the people. It took me three days to write a story that, on any other subject, would have taken three hours. I described all that I had seen in as precise detail as possible, quoted carefully each of the people I'd interviewed. As the pages came out of my typewriter and fell on the floor

around me, they seemed to form a tapestry of madness, of a people who had given up not only their sense of reason, but also of life itself.

### **State Radio and the Inter-Ethnic Crisis**

Several weeks later, at the beginning of December, I went to Gihanga, a small area 20 kilometers northwest of Bujumbura. Because the majority of the people who lived there were Tutsis like me, I felt safe and thought I would be able to cover the massacres between Hutus and Tutsis that had just broken out there. On the road where the confrontations had taken place, I watched helplessly as a group of four or five Tutsi boys, with machetes, cut the throats of two small Hutu girls six or seven years old. It was as if the boys were cutting down a tree trunk. The blood of the two girls gushed like a waterfall, their cries begging for mercy from killers without mercy. It cannot be described. Their lives were extinguished before me.

I have never forgotten the image and I consider myself a criminal as well because I did nothing to save them. And what shocked me even more was that these young Tutsi killers approached me, laughing, just to tell me, "We had to kill them, because their parents killed our parents, our brothers, our sisters. But you must not broadcast it on the radio, and you shouldn't write about it either."

I didn't say anything. I was on the verge of tears. I was sorry that I was there, present at the deaths of children whose only sin was to be Hutus on the road with these Tutsi killers, and I was sorry that I had had no way to save them. I saw even worse all along the journey that day, dozens of children's bodies, and I realized that it was because the children were unable to flee and no one would protect them. Even the police were with these soldiers, drinking and yelling, laughing. They were almost all drunk, and I was struck by how happy they were.

I knew some of these police from college. One of them said to me, "These Hutus are criminals; they have killed thousands of Tutsis since the death of President Ndadaye, and we must do the same." I thought they were incredibly stupid. Professionals of justice who promoted vengeance. I felt lost and tense. On one hand, the Hutus had massacred a great many members of my extended family. In the two days after the death of the President, they had killed 102 of my relatives in the central part of the country—including my aunts, my uncles, nephews, and cousins.

One evening towards the end of October—I'm not really sure of the date anymore—I had

left Kamenge, my home, leaving everything behind me. My childhood friends, who were all Hutus, came to warn me of an impending attack on Tutsi families. They said that the attack would mainly be on families with children in the military. My family was thus a target, because the first sin was to be a Tutsi in this area at this time, and the even graver sin was that all my brothers were soldiers, enemies of the Hutus. My friends told me that they could protect the lives of my family for this one night, but that I'd better move out the next day to an area that was safer for Tutsis. "They've all gone crazy," said my childhood friends, with compassion. "They say that they don't want any Tutsis around anymore. We don't want to see you killed."

All these thoughts were turning round in my head as I walked along the road to Gihanga: the murdered children, the agonized cries of the two little girls, the joy of the killers, my own family massacred in the center of the country, and the compassion of my childhood friends, with whom I maintain good relations to this day. Of course, some of them are now dead. I was firmly resolved to publish what I had seen at Gihanga. I felt a moral and professional duty to document and publish what I had seen first hand.

The next day my information became the focus of discussion at an editorial meeting at the State radio station. I played my recordings for my colleagues. All of my Hutu colleagues wanted the report to be broadcast just as it was, because they figured the massacres of Hutus would not be covered by national radio, and it told a real part of the story. My Tutsi colleagues were all opposed to the broadcast. Their arguments centered on the fact that such information could provoke vengeance upon the Tutsis who had escaped to refugee camps.

I proposed to all my colleagues that my reporting be broadcast as a kind of rumor control. I recalled that in 1988, based on a false rumor that the Tutsis were preparing to attack them, Hutus had taken their machetes and massacred their Tutsi neighbors in northern Burundi. Thousands of people died—5,000, according to the government's later report. I reminded my colleagues that recently Hutu leaders had purveyed a complete rumor, saying that after the assassination of President Ndadaye, the Tutsis and the army were planning to massacre the Hutus and therefore that the Hutus had to be the first to attack. I said that the revenge of the Tutsis utilized the same methods: *Hunt down your neighbors before they hunt you down, kill them before they kill you.*

My own plan, I explained, was very simple. It consisted of broadcasting the information and presenting it as an endless tragedy of violence, then asking political leaders of all persuasions to issue a clear message that would cut short the rumors and, finally, to press the military and the police with questions, so that they would promise to give very clear orders to their men to stop the violence.

My colleagues, especially the Tutsis, wouldn't support me. They continued to insist that it would be "inopportune" to broadcast such information because the consequences would be even more serious. They were truly disturbed by what I was saying.

The Hutus, while they wanted my report broadcast, wanted a modification. They wanted political leaders to give their points of view, which would add more venom to the situation, rather than offer a message of conciliation. Although the radio's editor-in-chief at the time, Celsius Nsengiyumva, was a Hutu who was troubled by the evolution of violence, he was fearful of his Tutsi colleagues, most of whom had lost family members in the countryside. He didn't have the strength to carry out his responsibilities, so my reporting was censored.

As I digested my bitterness over the censorship, one by one, my colleagues came to me to try to make me understand their positions. The Tutsis told me that I was naïve. Reminding me of the many massacres committed by the Hutus, almost all of my Tutsi colleagues admitted that they supported this latest wave of Tutsi violence. As one put it,

My parents always told me that the Hutus dream only of exterminating the Tutsis. It's true. Don't be naïve—why haven't they reported the massacres committed by their brothers? It's you who must expose the brothers. What kind of Tutsi are you? Hasn't anyone ever taught you the importance of keeping secrets? And you're a Tutsi from Kamenge to boot—it's hard to believe.

This is how one of them spoke to me; I don't want to mention his name.

Of course, his idea about secrecy was not new to me; I, too, had always heard it from my parents. My father had always told us to keep quiet about what was going on in the family. He told us to speak with a low voice, because one never knew who might be listening. He explained that secrecy was important in our culture, and said that it was even forbidden to say in public what we had eaten.

I began then to realize that the tradition of keeping secrets from each other about our people's misdeeds, and the wholesale protection of collective interests, were the diseases of my society. I also began to realize that they were incompatible with my work as a journalist. I told myself that my father was a victim of this manipulation. He belonged to the colonial generation, he was uneducated, he had lived through the conflicts between Hutus and Tutsis from the very beginning: the Hutu genocide of the Tutsis in Rwanda in 1959, which had left its mark on Tutsi imaginations in Burundi. It must be added that the Tutsi genocide of Hutu intellectuals in 1972 had left a similar mark on the imaginations of Hutus.

Not being educated, my father didn't know that the Rwandan Hutu intellectuals, encouraged by the Belgians, had put out a false rumor that the Tutsis had killed the king. Therefore, it was necessary to rise against them in revenge. As for myself, I belonged to another generation, and I refused to be manipulated or, rather, to be the manipulator. The Hutu journalists at the station told me that they supported my efforts, but they admitted that they couldn't broadcast any reports on atrocities committed by the Hutus out of fear of Hutu extremists on one side and of the military on the other. Professionally, I realized, we were all being made powerless by the structure of the conflict.

Their willingness to remain silent as journalists haunted me. I was very curious about this, and asked them why. Their answer was that they understood why the Hutus were killing: it was the only way for them to get back at the Tutsis and to fight against their arrogance. I will never forget what one of them said to me,

You Tutsis are all arrogant, you crush us, you are in the minority, and things are not going to go on this way. If the Hutus kill 100 Tutsis each day, how many Tutsis will be left?

I began to discover that each of my colleagues at the station had been harboring secret hatred toward another. I felt like vomiting when I saw them exchange their hypocritical smiles. How could a poor Tutsi peasant crush, step on, dominate an evolved, educated Hutu who was a journalist, on top of it? How could he so threaten the interests of a government official that he would deserve death? How could one justify the deaths of those Hutu children whom I had seen slaughtered like sheep? Were they planning to exterminate the Tutsis? Why were those little

girls dead? All these questions ran through my head, with no answers. I could not understand this hatred or its origin. I especially could not understand why the hatred was so great at the highest levels of society. I did not understand.

I was able to publish my report on Gihanga which had been censored by the radio in my newspaper, *La Semaine*. I described everything I had seen at Gihanga. The massacres of the children, the behavior of the police. I illustrated the attitude of the politicians who propagated rumors to stir up more violence. In the same issue an editorial by Patrice Ntibandetse, my old journalism professor and one of our university's more revered teachers, was even more critical of Burundi's intellectuals for their part in fomenting such hatred.

The cream of Burundian society has just shown, in the most bitter way, its total incapacity to run the country. Our thousands of intellectuals, for whom Burundi has given blood in order to train in humanism, have not gone beyond the stage of the vendetta, the way of our ancestors. Primitives we have been and we still are at the dawn of the twenty-first century. I kill you, you kill me, we kill each other, and then?

Reactions to my own article were as surprising as they were bizarre. My wife told me that everywhere she went, Tutsis told her that I was a traitor. She told me that she had much the same impression, because she felt I hadn't been able to control my anger in the article. She asked me to stop doing this kind of reporting because it was going to create useless enemies for me. My brothers and some of my friends said the same thing.

Others told me that they liked the article. Many of them admitted to me in private that they were opposed to the killing, but they were afraid to denounce it publicly. And as violence followed upon violence with greater intensity in parts of the city, *La Semaine* published witnesses' accounts from every side, denouncing the killing, but always under the cover of anonymity, fearful of naming names. I realized then that the people of Burundi had been taken hostage by invisible forces, but also that many were cowards, poor, passive, and terrified.

Just as the army massacred Hutus in the city of Bujumbura, Hutu militia had been massacring their Tutsi neighbors in the areas where they were in the minority, and the Tutsi soldiers, with the support of the army, were doing the same thing in the areas where the Tutsis were in

the majority. The press vied with one another in calls for murder or to justify the resulting massacres, depending on which ethnic group they were defending. Suddenly the conflict had re-designed the society along lines of violence and political survival. *Dawn of Democracy*, a Hutu newspaper, did not hesitate to justify the massacre of over 50,000 Tutsis in October, 1993, just after the death of the President, an act perpetrated by Hutu peasants under the manipulation of Hutu party leaders. In an article that had appeared earlier that year in April of 1993, *Dawn* had even foreshadowed the slaughter:

Opressed for a long time, the Hutu people, like a spring too tightly wound, have expressed their withheld anger against the oppressor, and if it has to be done again, it will be done again.

Articles and analysis published in *Dawn* presented the Tutsis and the army as criminals to be killed. Meanwhile, the Tutsi papers weren't gentle either. Their own pieces aimed at galvanizing the Tutsis against the Hutu terror. According to newspapers such as *The Crossroads of Ideas*, the Hutus dreamt only of exterminating the Tutsis. In January of 1994, *Crossroads* wrote:

All Tutsis must be very clear-headed about confronting the Hutus, using their methods, because they are not the only ones who know how to use a machete . . . if not, they will roast us all on the spit.

In some of its publications, *Crossroads* also expounded its racist ideology towards the Hutus, saying that Hutus had ugly faces and using physiognomy as a means to identify and dehumanize them in the eyes of the Tutsi.

Meanwhile, the most powerful medium—Burundi's state radio station—became the arena in which political parties and extremist factions would compete with each other ideologically through "news" that was no more than communiqués read by journalists. Hutu journalists at the station were reduced to silence, and two of them were assassinated, Makobanya in February, 1994, and Alexis Banryatuyaga in September 1994. The ones who were left were the ones who accepted having to remain silent. Others went into exile in neighboring countries and became a powerful force at a clandestine "hate radio" station based in Congo (the former Zaire) only 25 kilometers from Bujumbura. The radio station, called Radio Voice of The People, broadcast only in order to rouse the Hutus against the Tutsis.

I began then to reflect on why most of my fellow journalists did not want to mobilize in order to help change things or to reduce the tensions. My answer was that they had never been close to the majority themselves, and that the structure of media in Burundi was a bureaucratic superstructure meant to subdue and reduce innovation. As employees of the state, the journalists had never learned to serve the public. They covered only events that had been created by the political authorities. There were powerful practical forces at work in their attitudes, of course. The only route to success and security in Burundi had been a position in public administration—and the radio was a training ground for working in the government. The journalists maneuvered in this circle, serving their ethnic, regional, or clan authority, hoping to elbow themselves into a nice little spot as director, or as ambassador. But by getting so mixed up in politics, they ended up feeling more like politicians than journalists. At the time of the Hutu democratic victory, Hutu journalists figured that their time of privilege had come, and that Tutsi colleagues were looking at their own sunset. They were engaged in fanatical causes, led by political leaders of their ethnicity. I did not want to get involved in this game, because I detested the condition of our society which was brought about by political military authorities and their habitual manipulation and corruption.

Some of my Tutsi colleagues hated me, but they also respected me. They considered me an idealist, and sometimes they circulated it about that I was Hutu, which was a grave insult to my mother, who was afraid of the Hutus and actually hated them. My Hutu colleagues wanted to use me, explaining that the Hutu cause was a just one. But for me, I understood the game all too well by now: they were all the same, and I was different.

This state of the press, and especially of the radio, made me sick, and ashamed of myself. I was ashamed to go pick up my government paycheck at a time when taxpayers were continuing to die without anyone making the least effort to bring about peace. After much reflection, I decided in June of 1994 to leave my job at the national radio and to concentrate exclusively on writing for *La Semaine*. I felt useless in radio. I had no influence to change the status quo, even though I was convinced that radio was the only medium really capable of diminishing tensions, if it wanted to play its role.

The paper paid me almost nothing, less than 100 dollars a month. I had heavy bills be-

cause I was renting two houses, one for my mother and my two little sisters, and another for me and my little family. Life was hard, but still it was good because I loved what I was doing. Even if the newspaper's readership was small, 3,000 total, my conscience felt at peace. I was serving a little at something and able to work according to my own conscience and professional standards.

"Love Under the Machete and Bullets" was my last article for *La Semaine* before it closed after receiving repeated death threats. Published in mid-August of 1994, the article told the story of a mixed couple from Muyinga, in the northeastern region of Burundi, who were separated by the war. I had traveled to Muyinga in a convoy with the American ambassador at the time, Bob Krugger, and there I had met a woman refugee named Leonie Iconayigize in one of the Tutsi refugee camps visited by the ambassador. I decided to center my reporting for the paper on her story:

"I don't know why those Hutus were hunting me down. I married a Hutu, I have brought Hutus into the world, on my back I am carrying a Hutu," she told me. Then she cried, "I have to say this; Saidi, my husband, has to know this. He cannot come see me without risking his life. I cannot run the risk and go out into the Hutu area, but I love him, and he loves me, too, I know he does."

She was crying. Across the story of this woman, the suffering of thousands of Burundians is spread. A people with the same language, same culture, who'd intermarried and mingled as neighbors and co-workers, were now divided because of differences among its elite. Even now, those families are separated and live in solitary anguish.

### **Exile to Rwanda**

Just before *La Semaine* closed, I had been investigating a planned coup d'état fomented by hard-liner military officers close to one of the former Presidents, Jean Baptiste Bagaza. After the paper closed, I began to receive threatening telephone calls and anonymous letters personally. At first, I didn't take them seriously. When they called, sometimes I responded with insults, sometimes by just hanging up. More important, I felt I couldn't stop my investigations: my military sources were giving me new details each day on the impending coup.

On August twenty-fourth that midday, the telephone rang at my home. Someone with a

very dry voice, without introducing himself, said, "Listen, Alexis, the jokes are over. We are giving you 24 hours to save your life and the lives of your family. We have nothing against your wife and your newborn daughter, but if you stay with them, and we kill them with you, we don't need any witnesses." He hung up. He didn't give me any chance to respond.

I looked at my daughter, barely two months old, and I began to count the hours. I now lived in Nyakabiga, a Tutsi neighborhood, having left Kamenge out of fear for my family. I decided to call my older brother, a captain in the army. He was in the southern part of the country. His reply was simple, "Shit, what can you do, go to another neighborhood." I answered, "Impossible." He let out a big sigh, and said he had no other solution to propose. I told him that I needed time to think, and said I would call him back in one hour. I didn't have any solutions in my head. I couldn't go into a Hutu neighborhood, because I was still Tutsi. Worse, I would be hunted down because I had signed articles that they hadn't liked at all. I was forbidden to stay in the Tutsi neighborhood. I was trapped between two opposing forces.

I decided to call my friend and *La Semaine* colleague, Jean Marie Gasana, a Tutsi of Rwandan origin. He said, "I just got the same message." He seemed calm, and his sense of humor was intact. He added, "I have to eat now. I'm not going to let this spoil my appetite. At any rate, they gave us 24 hours, and in a few hours, before the time is up, you and I can be in Kigali, in Rwanda."

Two hours later, Jean Marie and I were on our way to Rwanda, which had recently been "liberated" by the Tutsi-led Rwandan Patriotic Front. I had only a moment with my wife and my two-month-old daughter who would be safer without me, and then I was off. As we headed to Rwanda, I thought of my daughter. I thought of my house at Kamenge, now destroyed by the Hutus; of my childhood friends who had saved my life; of the journalists at the radio station who would be very happy to learn that I was in exile. My wife, Diana, had always told me to behave like everyone else. Now I was alone, and I realized that I was worth nothing.

I had no newspaper, no more job, nothing. I cried and swore never to be a journalist again. "You're right," Jean Marie consoled me as we drove toward Rwanda, "we have to think about doing something else, and abandon journalism in this accursed country. We'll find something else to do. Come on, calm down."

## Studio Ijambo

In Kigali, Rwanda's capital, there was nothing to do. I lived in the house of some people I knew there, and ate little, depending on what Jean Marie's mother could find for us. There was no work, and I spent five months begging for money or cigarettes in the streets, reading old books and magazines I could borrow, and wondering whether I'd ever see my family or country again.

Finally a call came from my brother in Burundi. The political winds had shifted again, and it was safe for me to come home. But home to what? My family, of course, and those of my friends who were still alive; but how to support myself and my family? Going back to journalism seemed impossible—who knew when “the winds” would shift again? Yet I couldn't completely stay away. Through some acquaintances in Bujumbura, I found work freelancing anonymously through a tiny journalists' collaborative, the Association for the Protection and Promotion of Freedom of Expression. The pay was tiny, but with my wife working as well, we survived.

One afternoon in March, 1995, a young American, very dynamic and very intelligent, found me at my office at the Association. He worked for an American non-profit called Search For Common Ground. He seemed quite mature for his age. His name was Bryan Rich. He introduced himself and asked me if I would talk over some ideas with him. I answered yes, and when I asked if my friend Jean Marie could come to, he said “No, I came to speak with you.”

The first meeting lasted less than fifteen minutes. At first I understood Bryan only with difficulty, because he had at that time a broken way of speaking French. He said that my name had been given to him by several people, and that he wanted to create something like a radio station which would have as its goal the lessening of tensions, and which would provide the means for independent journalists like myself to report on the human side of the conflict and explained how “public media” meant to serve the public, etc.

We spoke two different languages, but we were speaking the same language. Looking back on it, I understood that Bryan wanted to create a radio station whose goal would be to diminish or help to end the violence by using a very subtle and complex approach that would try to add coherence and perspective to the crisis. This was my idea as well, but I didn't have the money or the means. Right away I accepted his offer and we arranged to meet again.

I then began to reflect. I had just returned from Rwanda, traumatized by the six months of exile and separation from my family. I did not want to start it all over again, I did not want to be labeled as a “journalist.” True, I was writing articles, this time in the paper *Le Phare* (The Beacon), but only under pseudonyms because I wanted to remain clandestine. In addition, I didn't have enough money to support my family, and I had moved my family again, in order to share my house with my mother and sisters.

My daughter was now eight months old. I was already afraid to get involved, I didn't want to run any additional risks. But people were continuing to die, the ethnic cleansing was reaching a troubling new level, the Hutus were being chased from the entire city, and terrorization by the Tutsi soldiers scared me. On one hand, I was fascinated by Bryan's determination. He didn't know our society, its intrigues, its lies, or its manipulations. Yet I felt a strong energy somewhere pushing me to work with him. I also felt sorry for him not being able to comprehend the reality facing what he proposed. I was pulled in different directions.

At the end of our second meeting, I felt I understood Bryan perfectly. The meeting lasted two hours. Using diagrams of how program production could work using multi-ethnic teams of reporters with strict guidelines, he explained not only his idea but himself to me, and this time I understood his language without difficulty. We would collect information for our programs, then we would edit it and give it to broadcasters. To begin with, the target broadcaster was Burundi's state radio station. For a long time I discussed with Bryan the objectives of this new approach to media, and the way to obtain results. He had been recruiting other journalists as well and eventually with the final team of journalists we defined it as such:

- to reach the maximum number possible of ordinary people, both the perpetrators and victims of violence. Their eyewitness accounts would define the conflict and its consequences on everyday life and would propose solutions.
- to create, encourage, and reinforce the confidence and credibility of local journalists. For that, it was necessary to have a team composed of Hutus and Tutsis working together and respecting the basic rules of journalism as well as showing the common ground they shared.

We decided to call ourselves “Studio Ijambo,” choosing the word “ijambo” because it meant both literally “word” and “speech” in

Kirundi, and also “speaking the truth.” Five journalists and two technicians comprised the initial Studio Ijambo team. Gervais Abayeho and Pamphile Simbizi were our Hutu journalists. A third Hutu was the studio’s driver. Agnes Nindorera and Aline Ruzindana, both Tutsi, were the only women, Agnes a journalist and Aline a technician. Jean Marie Gasana, my Tutsi friend of Rwandan origin, was a member of the team, too.

I knew both Abayeho and Simbizi, the two Hutu journalists very well, having worked with them at the radio station. Pamphile was young, just 25, very reserved. He liked to tell me that the only way to live in Burundi was to stay quiet and to speak only when necessary, because words can be interpreted in different ways. His strategy so far had worked for him, because he was one of the rare Hutus who stayed at the State radio station. But his end was to be tragic.

By then, after almost two years of slaughter—and 60,000 dead—Burundis’ elite, under tremendous outside pressure, had formed an ethnically bipartisan government, led by a Hutu President and a Tutsi Prime Minister. Although the government was now formally open to all political parties, the army and police force were dominated by the Tutsi, who had no confidence in the Hutu president, whom they accused of being in cahoots with the Hutu rebels still roaming the country. The country lived to the rhythm of violence, encouraged by Tutsi politicians and the army on the one hand, and by the Hutu rebels supported by the Hutu politicians on the other. The latest word was that 100 people were being killed each day.

It didn’t take long for the Studio to become a victim. As we prepared for our broadcast debut, one of our journalists was killed by the army on June 5, as he was going to work. Pamphile Simbizi was dead just two months after the launching of the Studio.

His corpse was found in a latrine, his head and his arms severed from his body. According to friends who had been able to escape, they were fleeing from a military patrol that had suddenly ordered them to stop. Pamphile put his hands in the air and cried, “I am a journalist with the State radio station!” The soldiers shot him in the back. His friends, who didn’t stop, saw him fall to the ground. Then as though they weren’t satisfied with his death alone, the soldiers had apparently then cut him into pieces, and dumped him in the latrine.

The murder of Pamphile affected all of us. Everyone broke down. I was ashamed to look a Hutu journalist in the eye because I imagined

that he wouldn’t believe in my suffering, my sorrow. I wanted to hide. A few days later some Tutsi journalists at the state radio station tried to justify the death of Pamphile, using a rumor that he had been a CIA agent. Beside myself with anger, we ended up insulting each other almost to the point of coming to blows.

My wife was absolutely furious that I’d gotten into this fight, and she forbade me from having this kind of public discussion with Tutsi journalists ever again. She was right, of course, and so was Pamphile’s own saying about keeping quiet being the only way to avoid trouble. The problem was knowing whether to suspend Studio Ijambo. Bryan explained that he wasn’t able to judge the significance of this kind of incident; he didn’t want to see more journalists get killed, one after another. After long discussion we convinced Bryan that Pamphile had not been killed for his association with Studio Ijambo, and we decided to continue because everyone felt that to give up would be to give more strength to the extremists. Pamphile was replaced by Stanislas Mwero, another Hutu journalist. We moved into a building just completed by some Greek businessmen. We chose the building because it had several entrances and exits, as well as offices, so that it would be difficult for outsiders to track who was coming and going to which office. It was both public in terms of access and private once you entered the studio. (This was different from other foreign-operated projects which operate from houses behind walls, in neighborhoods where one ethnic group or the other would feel intimidated.)

We worked for several weeks in teams and discussed the best approaches to program production. Bryan forced us to concentrate on developing a style and approach that could penetrate the misinformation, but which would not alienate us from the key players. The focus was on developing a style and identity which would be considered neutral, relevant and credible to listeners. We developed sample programs and test formats which combined different feature and reporting styles and was devoid of commentary by the reporters themselves. The production quality was much higher than at the national radio, something we wanted to be noticeable. Our editorial line was oriented towards defining problems and proposing solutions.

After lengthy negotiations, National Radio of Burundi (RTNB) became the initial broadcaster for our programs. The Studio had two blocks of programs each week: one in the national language, Kirundi, called *Amasangazira*

(Crossroads), and another in French (Program Express). We all agreed that our initial focus would be on the humanitarian consequences of the war; showing that both Hutu and Tutsi civilians had been victims of the war, that there was no winner; as Bryan explained, this was in the tradition of Search for Common Ground's approach to reporting in conflict areas: programming, the group believed, must build on commonalities without avoiding the difficult questions. To us, it seemed an effective way to begin slowly building identity and credibility.

We began by producing a series of programs on refugees, displaced and dispersed people. The conflict was heavily coded by accent, terminology, and neighborhood. We worked carefully to avoid reinforcing these stereotypes, while trying to accurately depict the conditions of civilians regardless of ethnicity as a consequence of the war. We didn't have to specify whether the interviewee was Hutu or Tutsi; it was enough to give the location of the refugee camp for listeners to figure out the ethnicity of the person who was speaking. Normally the words interviewees used or their accent denoted their ethnicity as well.

One of our first programs took us to a Hutu refugee camp run by American missionaries led by an American pastor named Johnson who settled in Burundi in 1940s. The Hutus sheltered there had fled the fighting between the rebels and the army at Kamenge and on the mountains edging the city of Bujumbura. Even though the camp was receiving at least minimum humanitarian aid, for a while four or five people had been perishing there every day. We conducted interviews with many different people. One woman told me,

I came here six months ago with five children. Two have died, and I have three left. I used to sell vegetables and things, and my husband helped out with his small salary, but he is dead now, too. He was killed in the fighting in the mountains. Back when life was good, people lived together and helped each other. Can't we live like that again?

Several people emphasized how difficult the living conditions were in the camp. One man said to me,

Tell the politicians to send us back home. We need to live again with our old Tutsi neighbors. We are all the same; these problems have been imposed on us. They need to straighten out their power struggles and let us, the people, live in peace.

With these words echoing in my head, I left and went to Ngagara, the Tutsi refugee camp not far away. The accounts were the same. Each day children were dying. I found an elderly man I had known at Kamenge. He had aged considerably because of the living conditions. He said to me,

I often listen to the radio, and the politicians are always talking about the refugees. Do they really know what our living conditions are like? I would like to ask them to spend a single night here with me. Maybe that would help them find a solution, so we can go back to our homes. The Hutu leaders talk about the Hutu refugees, and the Tutsi leaders say the same things, but I haven't yet seen a single one of them come to visit the refugees. We want to go back home and live like we used to. If we have to die there, because there's no guarantee of safety, at least we'll die with dignity, at home. This camp is a place of death.

After completing my camp interviews, I invited representatives from different political parties and NGOs to Studio Ijambo for a debate.

They listened to tapes of various interviewees; then I introduced the debate by saying, "You have just listened to accounts by refugees at the Johnson camp and the camp at Ngagara about their living conditions. We couldn't visit all the camps, but we are here in the studio with Edith Berwzyl of the International Red Cross, who has given us statistics on mortality and malnutrition, and who has explained what the Red Cross is doing to improve the situation in the camps. In general, the statistics and the NGOs' description of living conditions are frightening. Our idea has been to show everyone the reality of the refugees' lives."

I then asked the political party representatives: "Have you already sent delegations to visit the camps?" Their response was always the same, one echoing another: "No, but we're getting ready to do so. Right now we have people in the camps who are sending us reports . . ."

The programs on the war refugees exposed the apathy of the political leaders and their inaction. We weren't rude to them, and they responded simply to our questions, which were based on the refugees' accounts. Our series seemed to have a very powerful impact. Listeners found these leaders ridiculous, and the debates on the refugees began to take another form: the leaders stopped trying to dissuade the refugees from going back home. The series ended up contributing to a mass return of Hutus

and Tutsis to the Kinama and Buyenzi neighborhoods of the capital, a very unified Muslim area that had gone through a period of instability.

That early program became just one example among many other similar stories that we did that focused on the war and sought to create an intersection between the people and the leaders on key issues. It was an oblique approach that depended on the cooperation of the National Radio and was therefore somewhat limited. However it was perfect to test programming and experiment with our new ways of reporting. After a short time, people began to respond to us as the journalists from Studio Ijambo and would speak with us or give us testimony. This connection with ordinary people gradually became the crucial basis upon which our expansion would be built.

Following the events in Rwanda, Radio Agatashya was founded by the Swiss foundation Hironnelle as an emergency information service for refugees and displaced people. In November, 1996, Studio Ijambo formed a broadcast partnership with Radio Agatashya in order to diversify and sustain outlets for programming. Radio Agatashya, under the leadership of a Swiss journalist, Phillippe Dahinden, had very quickly built a loyal and captive audience in the region. It was not always appreciated by the Tutsi elite who thought it was set up to provide information to Hutu refugees in Zaire, but because of the quality of the reporting they were forced to listen.

Studio Ijambo began feeding programs and news to Radio Agatashya on a daily basis using a satellite telephone and UHV transceivers, and we increased our personnel to meet the increased demand. Adrien Sindayigaya, a Hutu, and Christophe Nkurunziza, a Tutsi, plus two local translators joined the team. With two broadcasters, Radio Agatashya and Radio Burundi, Studio Ijambo now could be heard in several countries: Burundi, Rwanda, and eastern Zaire (now Congo), together more than six million radio listeners. Bryan assigned me responsibility for Radio Agatashya news broadcasts in Kirundi, French, and Swahili.

### **Radio Agatashya and Studio Ijambo**

The partnership with Radio Agatashya was a turning point for both us and Radio Agatashya. It provided more airtime to us and access to a much larger regional audience. This meant an increase in stature and credibility that we all hoped would provide greater security not just for us, but for all independent journalists. For Radio Agatashya it became a source of high-quality, up-

to-the-minute reporting on the conflict and enhanced their profile as a regional radio.

Studio Ijambo thus began a second phase of its existence. It had started out focusing on in-depth feature programming for Burundi, now we were providing news packages as well as shorter mini-feature stories in three languages to Radio Agatashya. As our mission changed so did our journalistic responsibility. This meant a professional obligation to cover the increasing atrocities against civilians as “news” as well as covering the attacks against the Burundian army. As Bryan put it later, it was like “tight rope walking in a hurricane.”

On the eighteenth of March, 1996, I received a telephone call from one of the Burundi Army’s spokesmen, Colonel Login Minani. “I’m going to give you some information,” he said, “This morning the ethnic cleansers attacked a refugee camp at Butezi, and, according to a statement I have, killed more than 50 people.” I immediately called my friends Christian Jennings, the local Reuters correspondent, and Steven Buckley, correspondent for the *Washington Post* based in Nairobi, and who had come to cover Burundi. Butezi is a commune in Ruyugi province, situated 140 kilometers from Bujumbura in the eastern part of the country. Before leaving, I told them that I needed to confirm the information with an independent source.

I called some missionaries living in the Butezi region, who confirmed the news. So we left, five of us, with a third foreign journalist, an American journalist named Andy. I don’t remember anymore which newspaper he worked for. Adrien Sindayigaya, a young Burundian Hutu journalist who had just started working at the Studio came also. We left in one of the Studio Ijambo jeeps.

I let Colonel Minani, Army spokesman, know that we were going, and asked if the route was safe. He said that all was calm on the route. But then twenty kilometers outside Butezi we came upon crowds of fleeing peasants. We stopped and asked them what was going on. They said that they were running away from fighting. One of them gave us some details: “This morning we heard that assailants (Hutu rebels) had attacked the camp at Butezi. We saw a lot of soldiers come, we were afraid of reprisals, and already we’ve begun to hear gunfire.” “Where are you running to?” I asked. “Anywhere—in the valleys, in the woods . . .”

Several kilometers further on, we soon saw soldiers with tanks and jeep-mounted automatic

weapons. Steven, the correspondent for the *Washington Post*, gave me a questioning look, and I saw that he was nervous. I didn't know what I felt at this moment. Steven seemed to me a truly typical black American: huge, strongly built, serious, and handsome (all the pretty girls of Bujumbura wanted to go out with him). To see him in a state of fear made me feel like laughing while I felt sorry for him at the same time. In English, Christian Jennings told the other two Americans, "Don't worry; Alexis is going to talk to them in Kirundi."

The soldiers stopped us, and one of them approached us very slowly. He said in Kirundi, "Your papers." "We are journalists," I said in the same language. He turned around his vehicle, and came up next to Steven, asking him something in Kirundi. I immediately spoke up, saying that he didn't speak Kirundi, that he was American. Steven, Andy, and my Hutu colleague, Adrian, were all very tense. I then gave my name, and the soldier said, "Go ahead." We could hear automatic weapons fire everywhere, and Steven told me to ask if the route was safe. The soldier said that it was, that the shots were far away in the mountains.

Back in the Jeep, I told Steven that the soldier had spoken to him in Kirundi because Steven looked more Tutsi than I did. I added that his life would be in danger if we came upon a Hutu rebel roadblock. He opened his eyes wide and said, "Really?" "Yes," I reassured him. "But we are with Adrian. He'll save us if they give us enough time to explain," I said, but then I also told him that news of our trip had been sent to soldiers by military headquarters in Bujumbura.

Fifteen minutes later, we arrived at the camp at Butezi. 58 corpses greeted us: 26 children, 21 women, five elderly men and six adult men. Most of the children had been burned alive; others had been cut into pieces with axes. Some of the women had been burned next to their children, others had been killed with machetes; the men and the elderly had been killed with hammers and with clubs. The perimeter of the little camp of 300 people was soaked with blood. The killers had been able to do their killing without interruption. Looking at these corpses, one could guess at the suffering these poor people had endured, killed only because they were Tutsi. Some of the survivors were crying and some were resigned. Andy cried out, "What violence! What a crime!" Steven Buckley was stupefied and said simply, "Jesus!" My Hutu colleague, Adrian, had tears in his eyes. It was the first time he'd covered a massacre. Tutsi students had hunted down

his Hutu classmates the previous spring, killing more than twenty of them, but Adrien had managed to escape, and so had never seen bodies lying out like this. "I didn't know that the Hutus killed in this way," he confessed, "I am truly shocked, believe me."

Provincial government officials began to arrive under military escort to bury the bodies, and we went over to the survivors so they could tell us what had happened. According to them, the rebels had invaded the camp at about four in the morning. First, using rifles, they had attacked the local military's little garrison, to prevent the soldiers from interfering. Then others, numbering more than one hundred, had entered the camp with machetes, hammers, and other weapons and begun killing. One woman survivor, Marcienne Nzeyimana, recounted,

In 1993, on the hill where I lived before the crisis, the Hutus killed my husband and two of my sons. I took refuge in this camp with my three remaining children. Now they came and killed two more, and the only son who is left to me has joined the army, perhaps to be killed as well in the fighting. I have no more tears. I am resigned, because it's too much for one person to bear.

We made a quick visit to the adjacent hospital, which was run by Italian missionaries, hoping to talk to some of the wounded, about 40 total, but the Italian priest refused to let us in. He had closed off all access to his hospital in order to protect his Hutu employees, who were at risk of becoming victims of military reprisals and receiving journalists could be misinterpreted by the soldiers. Early that afternoon, we returned to Bujumbura, brooding in silence.

At one point, Christian had tried to break the mood we found ourselves in. "I have to find a mad cow here," he said, thinking of his British editors. "I'll make a lot of money with that."

We all laughed, but then silence took over again. There was no mad cow, but madmen there had been, and there were still. I looked at the mountains bathed in the afternoon sunlight, and contemplated the endless greenery unrolling beside us as we traveled along, and the intensely cultivated valleys, which had been abandoned by a dispossessed and shifting population.

I remember thinking to myself, "My country is very beautiful, very poor, very violent, and very ignorant. All the extremes." I felt a hate inside me towards no one in particular, because I had never seen the criminals, and knew they would never pay for their crimes. I thought of

my daughter, who would soon be two years old, and of the children her age whose lives had been brutally ended, and I knew that she risked the same end, too. One single question kept coming back in my head, "How to stop the violence?" There was, of course, no answer.

We arrived back in Bujumbura at four that afternoon. Work at the Studio was going to be different from what the foreign journalists were used to, because we had a very different audience. We had as much or as little time as we needed to convey the information. We could produce a 10 minute piece or a 20 minute piece or we could just give a basic wire service report. We determined this based on each incident, trying to avoid inciting any kind of reprisals by providing as much perspective as possible to each story.

I had read the communiqué published by the military staff during my absence, and I found it less than neutral. I called the army spokesman, and told him that I wouldn't use the communiqué unless he modified it. I proposed that he write, "We are going to fight all criminals of no matter what ethnicity in order to stop the violence," instead of "We are going to fight the tribal-genocide criminals," which would be understood to mean the Hutus.

I explained to him that the first thing would be to discourage the Tutsi militia from wreaking vengeance on innocent Hutus. I wasn't naïve. I knew there would be reprisals, but in the spirit of Studio Ijambo I had to try at least to diminish their magnitude. I'm not sure why, but he ended up taking my proposal and giving me an interview.

Next, I called the various heads of influential political parties from all sides to ask them to issue a call for peace and to condemn the crime. Then we sent our reporting to Radio Agatashya. First Adrien related the facts, specifying that Hutu rebels had killed the Tutsis, and supporting these facts with eyewitness accounts from the scene. After his report came my interviews, which aimed at discouraging any acts of vengeance. Our structure had a double goal: Adrien reporting the Hutus' deeds and being himself Hutu lent credibility. Then the appeals I'd gotten from political and military officials became voices against any act of vengeance.

After Steve's story about the massacre appeared in the *Washington Post*, the U.S. State Department reacted with a condemnation of the massacre. The army spokesman called me. Quite pleased, he informed me of the State Department's condemnation, and said that it was important for the world to know that the rebel Hutu movement

was a bunch of killers. I knew then that the Tutsi deaths we'd seen were being mourned because they were useful to the army and Tutsi politicians in their diplomatic maneuvers.

I understood that the lives of the people were up for bid by their own political leaders. To our leaders, ironically, I was seen as a good Tutsi, and Studio Ijambo as a credible station, very beneficial for the country. But several weeks later the spokesman reacted differently when the victims were Hutu and the perpetrators the national Army.

On the morning of May 15, 1996, while I was having coffee with Bryan, Christian Jennings, our colleague from Reuters, and Ferdinand Farella, a journalist at Voice of America who specialized in the Great Lakes region, a man came in and asked in Kirundi to speak with "Alexis."

He didn't know me, and I didn't know him. I asked him what he wanted; he said he wanted to make a proposal for some reporting, because everyone listened to Studio Ijambo and Radio Agatashya and had confidence in them. I asked him to follow me into the sound booth that often served as an impromptu and secure room for discussion. There he said again that "Alexis" was the man he wanted to speak to. When I said I was Alexis, he refused to believe me, so I pulled out my identity card. Then he told me, "The soldiers have killed more than 200 people at Buhoro." "Where's Buhoro?" I asked. He said it was at Mutoyi in Gitega Province in the center of the country.

I didn't even ask his name; instead I just said thank you and offered him a cup of coffee, which he accepted. Then I went out and called a missionary I knew at the nearby Xavierian mission. He told me to come to his house, which was a five-minute drive from the studio. I knew that the missionaries might have information, because there were some Italian priests living at Matoyi. Then I went back to the man who had given me the news, and asked him how he had known. He said that one of his friends had been at Mutoyi the week before. He added that he had spent a long time looking for the Studio's offices; and then he left. I yelled to my colleagues, "Put down your coffee! 200 people have been killed by the army in Gitega and we have to go. Apricot is waiting for me at his house with more information. I have to be there in 10 minutes."

Once we got to the mission, the priest received us with a long discourse about the calm and beauty of their monastery, and how it had

been there for many years, but I cut him off. "I don't give a damn about the beauty of your damn monastery! Tell us what happened at Mutoyi!" "But that's old news, my friend," he replied. "The military killed those people at Buhoro two weeks ago." I lit a cigarette and asked why he hadn't told me. "I can't tell everything to a crazy person," he said, smiling slightly. Everyone laughed.

He proposed that we drink some coffee, but we refused. It was already 10 o'clock, and I felt we had to leave for Buhuro. "I don't want you to get killed; that's why I keep certain information from you," the priest then said. "If you want to go now, it's calm. When you get to Mutoyi ask to see the priest there, and tell him that I sent you. He'll help you. Good luck."

At the offices of Studio Ijambo, Bryan was worried, as he was whenever the journalists and drivers were traveling. He knew how many ambushes had taken place and was weighing as usual the use of the report against the risk. The driver grabbed some bulletproof vests. Reporting equipment was readied for me. "Do you think Adrien should go?" asked Bryan. I answered, "No, because it's too dangerous for him. In this reporting we'll have soldiers against us, and if we bring along a Hutu, it will look like we're on the side of the Hutus." Bryan admitted he'd had the same thought, but he didn't like breaking down the teams except when security required it which was becoming more frequent.

So we set out in the Studio's new Land Rover for a trip of 85 kilometers, with a Tutsi driver, Jean Claude, instead of Yusuf, a Hutu, to avoid danger. This time, in order to get the facts, we had to work as an all-Tutsi team because the military would become dangerous if they thought there was a Hutu among us.

At the Army roadblocks, we couldn't present ourselves as journalists. As journalists we would have less chance of reaching the massacre sites, and might even be killed, even though we were Tutsi. Each roadblock was different from the next: some were difficult, some were easy. At the less difficult ones, our driver, who looked all too Tutsi, just said, "Humanitarian aid organization." The most difficult roadblock was at the entrance to Mutoyi itself. I told the military official at the roadblock that I worked with these white men for an American NGO that took care of orphans, and that we were going to a meeting at Mutoyi to see how we could help the orphaned children. "What is the name of this NGO?" he demanded. I had no idea what to say. I thought for a second, then blurted out,

"Health Care," and then I yelled, "Health Care, right, Jean Claude?" to our driver, so he and I would have the same story.

The soldier, who apparently didn't understand any English, gave the order to let us pass. None of us even breathed for the next half minute or so. We had to get to Mutoyi, and the soldiers, knowing what they had done, had every reason to stop, even kill, us if they knew we were journalists. Even if we got there, we knew we would be placing our lives and those of our sources on the line. It would be easy to ambush us on our way back from reporting, if word of what we were doing reached the military.

The priest welcomed us at Mutoyi. We arrived at noon, and he suggested that we eat. While we were eating, he recounted to us what had happened up on the hill at Buhuro. One week before the tragedy, he explained, local farmers informed them that the rebels had installed themselves on their hill. They had killed a local Hutu chief, accusing him of being a traitor and a spy for the military. The priest went on to say that the rebels had stayed on the hill and killed 20 people in all for the same reasons, then had left. A week later, the soldiers came during the night, circled the hill, and began killing. 234 people had been killed and 36 wounded, almost all women and children. They had were all been killed with hand weapons like bayonets. Not a single bullet had been fired. The missionaries had gone to the sites to evacuate the wounded and to bury the dead, and to avoid an epidemic.

The priest was frank with us: "Generally, I don't like to speak to the press. I told this to the military. What made me decide to speak with you is that no one is saying that Hutu innocents are often killed by the military. National radio broadcasts only the deaths on one side—but don't quote me. I don't want to have problems with the soldiers." We wanted to interview survivors, but because there were soldiers everywhere, we left after lunch. We didn't go to the tiny local hospital to talk with the wounded as normally we would because we didn't want to make problems for the priest or subject the wounded to further harm by the military.

Back in Bujumbura, we went to the Army's headquarters to hear their side of the story. The army spokesmen were all denials. "Nothing has happened in that region. It's all false." We departed, saying that we would be content with their version. Back at the office, I received a telephone call from one of the spokesmen. He said that perhaps something had happened, but that the numbers were exaggerated.

I decided to use this second version, saying that the army agreed with the facts but considered the numbers to be exaggerated. At the studio we began phoning politicians, asking them to call for calm. This Catholic bishop of Bujumbura condemned the massacres and asked all groups to stop the violence.

But even this reporting was not at all appreciated by the army: some officers called me to say very violent things, such as "We can do the same thing to you." Sometimes we had to stop in the middle of reporting, for security reasons. At these times, we told our listeners that we had received such-and-such information, but that we couldn't go investigate for reasons of security, so here was what the military staff said, here was what the political leaders said, here is the version of this person or another. One day this turned into a nightmare.

On June 3, 1996, I went to Cibitoke Province in the northwest part of the country with Bryan, Christian, and Jeff, an American cameraman based in London. Violent fighting had broken out between the Army and rebels based in Zaire (now the Congo). This fighting had provoked the flight of civilians, and forced all the NGOs except the International Red Cross to pull completely out of the region.

So we went there to cover the living conditions of those who had been displaced, which the Red Cross was calling "catastrophic." Bryan and Christian had planned the trip by telephone, although we knew that our phones by now were being tapped by military intelligence. After a 45-minute drive, we arrived at Cibitoke, 66 kilometers northwest of Bujumbura, where the Red Cross had begun to distribute water to the more than 20,000 people displaced by the fighting. We had barely finished arranging with the Red Cross to go to Mugina, another sinister place in the northern part of the province, when soldiers encircled us.

Their commander, a captain I knew very well by the name of Rucintago, came up to Christian and said, "So what is your name?" Christian introduced himself, and explained that he worked for Reuters. The captain suddenly bared his teeth and snapped, "So finally you have occupied all of Burundian territory!"

I approached our driver, Joseph, and said in Swahili, knowing that the Burundian military officers didn't understand Swahili, "You saw the look on those soldiers' faces. If we don't watch out, we're going to die. Bryan and his friends don't know this." The driver, a Tutsi like me, was scared. I felt my own blood running cold.

There were many people around, refugees and Red Cross workers, so we didn't risk anything by being there, but once on the road, we knew the soldiers could kill us in an ambush.

We got into our Land Rover. I asked the driver to pretend to head for the road back to Bujumbura. In the mirrors, we could see a jeep carrying our friend the captain and his well-armed men was behind us. We decided then to stop and not leave Cibitoke. When we took another direction, towards the north of the province, the jeep did not leave us. We stopped again, and I said to the team, "We might be living our last moments on earth right now. Bryan, these soldiers are going to kill us. It's simple—they're following us so they can ambush us. Two Tutsis and three whites, that's sufficient to explain that it was rebels who committed the act."

All of us were sweating with fear. The white men looked flushed. We drank some water and ate a little chocolate. We went into a nearby bar where some military authorities were meeting with Red Cross workers. Rucitago's men got out of their vehicle, came in too, and ordered drinks. We pretended to talk to people, but the soldiers didn't leave. Desperate, I decided on a ruse. I ordered drinks that I was sure the bar didn't have, then I said loudly to an officer so that our friends who were following us could hear, "My commandant, they don't have much here, so we're going to another bar. In 30 minutes we'll come back here for an interview with you and after that we'll go to Mugina with the Red Cross. So, see you later." Once outside, Bryan—who hadn't grasped my plan—started asking us all for an opinion. What is the story we need in Mugina that we don't already have? Why are these people following us? Who is this guy? I could see he too wanted to turn back, but wanted it to seem like a rational choice rather than one made out of fear or intimidation. At that moment, I didn't care whether the decision was "rational" or not. We got in the car and I yelled to the driver, "Take the road south, to Bujumbura."

We reached the Studio's offices at 3 P.M. I had made an appointment for an interview with Patrick Berner, the head delegate for Red Cross, to get some data on water distribution, cholera, and malaria in the region of Cibitoke. I arrived at their office at 4 P.M., and saw that everyone was tense. When Patrick saw me, he grabbed me and asked where we had been, when we left the Red Cross convoy, who was I with, etc.

Later, near 6 P.M., we learned that three of the expatriate Red Cross workers (Juan Ruffino,

Cedric Martin, and a man named Hoffmayer) had been killed at Mugina at about 4 o'clock in the afternoon. Bryan went home very depressed, convinced that the ambush had been meant for us.

Over the months, the Studio began to accumulate a lot of support in Nairobi, where most of the foreign press corps was based, and, in November 1996 the BBC and Reuters agreed to an arrangement with Studio Ijambo, in which stringers at the studio would be paid directly but Studio Ijambo would be credited in both print and radio.

The Studio was to produce programs and news, which would then be broadcast by these different western outlets. A month later, the AFP and Associated Press did the same thing. Then the Voice of America, Canal Afrique and Deutsche Welle, a South African radio station, also entered into cooperation with us. We reorganized once again to meet the increased demand for news. Suddenly we were providing information to virtually every single foreign news agency and radio in the country. This added a great deal of pressure on the journalists and on Bryan who constantly feared that someone would be killed on a story.

The sudden new influence of the Studio frightened and surprised the holders of political-military power and the armed Hutu movements. Now we were reporting directly to a regional and international audience that was broader than any reached by any of the government radio stations in the region. Now suddenly dissemination of information to the international community was controlled by an independent production group outside their control. The Studio, which in the beginning had been treated as a joke because of its low profile, was becoming more powerful and therefore could not be ignored. This new face of the Studio attracted harassment of all kinds, including the usual sophisticated methods of intimidation typical of our culture, reaching the journalists' friends, families, anyone who could possibly exert influence over us.

Our reports on human rights abuses especially did not please the militants, in either the army or the rebel movement. The military command threw my brother, a captain, into prison, falsely accusing him of responsibility for a massacre, shortly after we'd aired a series of reports implicating the senior military in widespread civilian killings. Additionally, they sent several members of my family, cousins, uncles, and friends, to tell me that if I didn't stop reporting on the Army's massacres, my brother would be

hanged to show the international community that the army was trying to discipline its men.

I answered that I was going to publish a report quoting those who had said this, and naming their position in the government. Reuters published my report on 400 dead at Bukeye in northern Burundi, and signed it Studio Ijambo. In a meeting on whether or not to levy sanctions against Burundi, Nelson Mandela cited the Studio's reporting in favor of levying sanctions. The harassment lessened; the army became cooperative, my brother was given the right to a trial, and was quickly acquitted.

One of the army spokesmen said to me, "It's true that you report everything, but from time to time try not to expose what we are doing. We are trying to correct things, but we can't do it under pressure. Your reporting is the truth, but even so, why broadcast it?" Why broadcast it? It was the questions we as a team of journalists had to consider so often. The truth can provoke a reaction, though we are not aware of any incident in which our reporting did anything but hold the war and its leaders up to scrutiny. Some soldiers told us that our reporting had made them more careful and worried, because we always found out and reported what we saw even if it was weeks after the event. Still, we had to consider every incident from a political point of view, not wanting to become an instrument of either the army or the rebel movement. The military would often say to us, look at the Americans during the Gulf War; they controlled the media and censored them for reasons of national security. It was a difficult situation since some of the journalists had lost so many friends and family on both sides that they had to work so hard to avoid their bias.

The final test was the audience, who came to know us whenever we went out to report. In many cases people would give us interviews and refuse them to other foreign journalists or the National Radio. It was a bizarre situation since we were just a group of journalists without a transmitter, but known throughout the whole region by our reporting. Ironically, not having a transmitter, which made us seem powerless in the beginning, was what now made us strong: we focused just on the reporting. All our meager resources went into the quality of the programming and the security of our staff. We didn't have to negotiate with or bribe officials for the right to broadcast or fear the destruction of a vulnerable and costly transmitter or antenna.

## **Perspectives on Studio Ijambo by Burundian Leadership**

In September, 1997, I left Burundi for the United States—my first trip outside Africa. I had been given a fellowship to work with academics and other journalists at the Kennedy School's Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy. There I planned to write my experiences, to gain some distance and perspective on them, and contemplate the next steps in my own future, and that of Studio Ijambo.

After several strange and often disconcerting weeks in Cambridge, as I learned to adjust to America's pace, its affluence, and my own halting command of English, I began to formulate what it is I would write.

But as I began to write from my own memories, I realized I also needed to interview Burundians who could help me frame a perspective on the Studio's impact on our nation's suffering. I especially wanted to see whether our leaders felt influenced by our work.

### ***President Pierre Buyoya***

In a telephone interview, Major Buyoya, the strongman of Burundi, acknowledged the usefulness of Studio Ijambo, even if he seemed to minimize its impact on the country's political evolution.

"I am perhaps not the best person to make an evaluation, but I believe that this project came at a moment when we in this country were in the dark as to how to approach the problem of peace, at a moment where the national press was dragging its feet, tied, no doubt, to the crisis which deeply affected everyone's spirits. Then, I think, we wanted to promote the press, create a good example, introduce professionalism, and in this way I think that this project has been useful. But this is my personal opinion, my personal appreciation, that this project has *not* influenced the general situation in a significant way."

### ***Army Spokesperson Colonel Nibizi***

For his part, the Army's spokesman, Colonel Isaie Nibizi, felt that the Studio could improve its results if it would just stay within its primary objectives. "Some of the Studio journalists dwell on sensationalism, blood, playing to the West which is not good in our situation, it's not helpful. It's necessary for the Studio to keep to its primary objectives, which is reconciliation between Burundians, peace, and teaching tolerance."

It was clear that the Colonel was protecting his interests, and that the civilian political leaders had a different view of the Studio than the military officers.

### ***Former President Sylvestre Ntibantunganya***

The former Hutu president, Sylvestre Ntibantunganya, deposed July 25, 1996 by the military coup that had brought Major Buyoya to power, was full of praise:

"We have to encourage the Studio, because it makes great efforts in spite of the difficulties and the threats. I know about the threats that the Studio journalists have received, but I think they should be encouraged even more than before. I regret they haven't had their own means of broadcasting, but at any rate I say congratulations to the accomplishments of the journalists of the Studio Ijambo." Himself a former journalist at the State radio station, Ntibantunganya affirmed that the government radio station was, and would remain, a mouthpiece for those in power. "For me, the power here is in the hands of the military officers, who don't want to give up to the people."

### ***Charles Mukasi, President of UPRONA***

Charles Mukasi, the President of the Tutsi-dominated UPRONA party also spoke to me. He affirmed that Studio Ijambo was the first and only good press organ in Burundi and the Great Lakes region. "Its level of technical production, its quality of reporting, and its programs, let alone its level of independence, make Studio Ijambo the best in the region. Its professional quality is unbeatable. We can't discuss this, but the problem is that it depends on broadcasters who can accept or not accept its programs and its reporting." Another former journalist, Charles Mukasi, felt that he was in a good position to know good from bad journalism. "We can detest Studio Ijambo, but we cannot refuse to recognize that they do good work."

These are the opinions of some of our leaders; I spoke to others, who did not want to be quoted. Harder to assess is our impact on ordinary people. I have to confess that we didn't perform any surveys of our listeners. However, as we were not the broadcasters, we thought the listeners of our broadcasters were our listeners, too. When I went to Kisangani in Congo to cover the war last March, the Congolese rushed towards me. I stood out in the middle of a crowd of white journalists, one of only two of us who were

black. When I told them my name, people in the crowd cried out, "Studio Ijambo! Studio Ijambo!"

The much greater impact of Studio Ijambo on Burundi's people, in my own personal view occurred in two ways:

1. First was the phenomenon of emulation. The studio's philosophy of independence and ongoing contact with civilian victims of the war transformed journalists who had long been prisoners of ethnic-partisan ideologies. Witnesses to horrors committed by Hutus against the Tutsis or vice versa, they each discovered, depending on their ethnicity, what had been hidden from them. At the same time that its journalists were changing, the Studio served as an example to the journalists at the State radio station, who copied the formula of our programs. Our colleagues at the State radio station understood that they, too, could broadcast sensitive news in a positive way.
2. Second was the decentralization of information. Studio Ijambo put an end to the culture of centralization of information by the State media by providing a variety of sources to international organizations. Until November 1996, the only source the international organizations had was the State media, and this played a negative role, since the international community's actions were based on false or distorted information.

In a divided society where even the press is divided along the same lines, Studio Ijambo benefited from an important credibility among the people of Burundi. In several cases individuals refused to grant interviews to the State media because they weren't sure that they would be protected as sources of information or they didn't know whether the information would be broadcast in a neutral way. For this reason the Studio was systematically perceived by everyone as able to play a credible role. In addition, the BBC, Voice of America, and press agencies, in contracting with Studio Ijambo to broadcast its news and programs, constituted a very significant step towards a new form of media coverage of the situation in Burundi.

But the Studio's influence then raises the question of how the Studio was able to succeed at all, given the conditions it faced. In my opinion, the success of Studio Ijambo was due to three principal factors. The first is leadership. Bryan Rich, as the project leader, did not fall into the same trap as other foreigners, who upon arrival create friendly relations with political of-

ficials, which eventually pushes them into taking sides in the conflict. He simply preferred his normal work relationships, which allowed him to maintain independence and clear observation of events. I could not have worked with him if he had taken a position in the conflict.

The second reason is the journalists. Concerned by a conflict that was, after all, theirs, the journalists collected and dealt with information in a neutral way without taking sides to help in the resolution of the conflict. All the journalists practiced the universal rules of journalism, and put out more fires than they started. This strict line of the Studio progressively changed the journalists themselves from being locked into their logic of protecting their ethnicity, to a place where they could look squarely at the realities of their country.

The last reason was the means of war, the means available to the Studio that made it able to function as an independent press. These means included first and foremost the mobility of the journalists. The vehicles allowing them to get to the site of an event in a hurry, the means of communication ranging from telephone, satellite telephone, and walkie-talkie to report on an event as rapidly as possible under any conditions. The transport and telecommunication infrastructure allowed us as Burundian journalists to be on the same footing as the international press. This proved something that until then had seemed unimaginable: that local journalists were capable of covering the events in their country without taking sides.

That doesn't mean, frankly, we were a success in covering other important issues facing our society. Fundamental questions such as corruption were not targeted by the Studio, not because they were not known, but because in the course of the evolution of the programming we were not willing to sacrifice what had been achieved in order to take on a criminal elite. We, in fact, organized a debate on the corrupting effects of the gold trade (the first in the history of the country), which was monopolized by rival Belgians and Pakistanis, one faction corrupting Hutu leaders and the other Tutsi leaders. But after the broadcast, the Belgian company was not happy, and Bryan received a polite visit from the head of the company, who threatened grave personal consequences if Bryan organized this kind of debate in the future. Faced with the enormous and immediate consequences of the mass murder still going on around us, we chose to practice a sort of journalistic triage.

## Conclusions

In analyzing the situation in Burundi and the political evolution of Africa's Great Lakes region, one is tempted to conclude that in the 1990s, our people had gone back to the 1960s, the first period of outpost-colonial independence. In form the political antagonisms were the same, if we compare the two periods. The sophisticated systems that maintained them, exploited them, or aroused them have not changed. The "social revolution" of the Hutus, encouraged by the Belgian colonizers in Rwanda, was a joke. Permitting the creation of a Hutu élite, it kept the Hutu masses in ignorance and misery, and maintained ethnic contradictions, no different from the Tutsi elite in Burundi.

The design is the same in Burundi, but with one particular difference: a greedy minority of military officers in Burundi in the south of the country controls the power and riches, and distributes them to whomever they want, or whomever they decide to buy. The same characteristic is observed in the ranks of the Burundian Hutu rebel movement, where the leaders draw a profit from the war, to the detriment of the farmers, who sink deeper day by day into total misery. Burundians who understand know that talk about democracy is still for foreigners.

They also know that nothing new will be done unless more—and more positive—change comes. It goes without saying that between the Zaire of Mobutu and the new Congo of Kabila, there has been a change of the name of the country and the person at its head, but not yet of The System. There has been even less change in the region's discourse: too much remains a nationalism which makes the masses dream, while the crushing of all desire for freedom of expression, to line up everyone behind one single Man, animated or inspired by one single thought or one single ideology. Tanzania is still at the hands of Nyerere, and the old reflex of keeping liberation movements alive in order to make everyone forget the country's internal problems caused a change in geopolitics. The Uganda of Museveni, which is perceived by the U.S. as a relative success, sticks a façade of stability on top of ethnic tensions, while the country's media, though diverse, are indirectly controlled by those in power on one hand, and by the opposition elite on the other. The last "free" elections showed the fragility of Uganda's future.

After a brief talk of Africa's "new democracies," I'm afraid the region has regressed into the same instability it had known since the 1960s, because those in power in the various

countries have still failed to encourage the diversity of ideas that let a society evolve. The systems of governance, at their core, remain the same. Yet to me it is clear that an independent press could offer a major step toward the changes we need. But the questions are old ones: How to create it? What form will it take? How will it survive?

In the case of Burundi, there are two possible solutions to the ethnic conflict that has torn the country for the past four years, and consequently three hypotheses on the evolution of the media would be possible.

First, the war will end with victory by the Tutsi-controlled army or by the Hutu rebellion. This will result in silence in the ranks, as the victor will control all discourse, and the face of the media will not be any different from what we have now. The media will be monopolized by the victors, who will use them at will to stay in power and to perpetrate exploitation of the people. In sum, a one-sided discussion which will sink the country slowly but surely into another catastrophe.

Second, the conflict will end in peaceful settlement. The two warring sides can sign peace agreements, form a transition government, and solve related problems together, culminating in free elections, according to the United Nations' standard plan for countries in civil war. The press can take sides politically and ethnically during and after the elections, putting an end to hate media. The forms would be diverse, but a dangerous polarization would lurk underneath. This kind of media scene cannot survive. The winner in the elections will not want to govern with a polarized media; it will have to forbid it. As a result, the form of the media will not be different from the first scenario.

Third, the intermediate solution is to create a powerful independent media, especially radio stations covering, if possible, the whole region, to educate people and to change political habits characterized by corruption at the highest level. In the past, we have had the habit of confusing an independent press with an opposition press. I have a deep-seated conviction that politicians are often the same, and that for the benefit of the public the press must play an intermediary role, and that this will provide more of a chance, certainly at least for Burundi, to nurture and then consolidate a truly democratic system.

I firmly believe in the principles of democracy; as Churchill said, it is the least bad form of government. But I confess that democracy is

inapplicable in a country where there is no middle class, or where the corrupt political system bases its survival or accession to power on emotional issues, such as ethnicity in Burundi and the ex-Yugoslavia, religion in Algeria, race (black and Arab) and religion in Sudan. I firmly believe that only the independent media provide answers to these problems. The leadership of Burundi is still bad, and corruption is the gravest consequence. And even if ethnicities didn't exist, someone would have created them. The ethnic problem is a result of bad governance. It was created to attain or maintain power, source of all riches in Burundi.

### **A Modest Proposal**

Western donors to Africa currently finance different programs through the World Bank, the United Nations Development Program, the European Community and various bilateral cooperative agreements, programs in the areas of agriculture, health, education, and private enterprise, and budget financing. Has the time now come for donors to create a special fund for the

creation of independent media, and to entrust it to organizations experienced in this area, and specifically with experience in Africa? We need to avoid the dangerous ineptitude that has plagued the developing world in other areas such as food aid.

More than creating an "independent media" that is dependent on the "goodwill" of the international community, a new generation of press projects need to be conceived and maintained which can themselves individually become economically viable within the context of the region's own economic development. Studio Ijambo proved that fact-based reporting is possible even in the most adverse conditions, and that international news organizations are willing to buy the programming on a commercial basis once its credibility and durability have been shown. I am fairly sure that with the correct management and financial control, such reporting could be launched throughout Africa, especially given the advent of new and inexpensive information technologies.

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