Rwandans Are Struggling To Love Children of Hate

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KIGALI, Rwanda -- Hands covering her eyes, her thin legs crossed to try to stop what she could not, Eugenia Muhayimana screamed out to God as the baby pushed through her birth canal. She said she yelled and kicked during two hours of labor, hoping her heart would stop, her soul would drift away and she and her infant would pass to a world where they could live in peace.

"We are already dead," Muhayimana recalled thinking. "I wished we could just disappear."

Her pregnancy was not conceived in love, or in a casual encounter. It was what women in Africa call a pregnancy of war. In 1994, during Rwanda's genocide, she was one of an estimated 250,000 women raped by Hutu militia groups. She survived three years of sexual slavery in the militia's forest encampments and emerged with a son and pregnant with a daughter.

Today they are known as *les enfants de mauvais souvenir,* the children of bad memories. More than 10,000 children were born of rapes during the genocide, according to victims' groups. They are the living legacy of a time of death, in which an estimated 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus were slaughtered in 100 days.

As the children grow toward adolescence, a generation of mothers is struggling to find acceptance for their children in their own hearts and in the community.

While there is rarely a conversation in Rwanda that does not mention the genocide, the subject of children born of rape is uttered only in whispers, a taboo even among relatives. The country's struggle to explain to the children how they were conceived mirrors Muhayimana's situation. She is waiting for the right moment to tell her son, and a daughter born two years later, that they are children of rape.

In her case, another mark of sexual violence, also a source of shame, is making the task more urgent. She has full-blown AIDS. The disease has withered her 30-year-old body to a skeletal 90 pounds on her lanky 5-foot-9-inch frame. With no other living relatives, she said that her greatest fear is not death, but dying before she can adequately express to her children where they came from, and how she came to love them.

From Violence to Love

At first, some mothers named their children "little killers" after the soldiers in the Hutu militia, Interahamwe, who had raped them. Some women abandoned infants on the

doorsteps of ministries saying, "They are children of the state." Some tried to kill their children.

Stories of tragedy and violence rang out recently from the wooden pews of Kigali Catholic Church, where widows of genocide sang and held hands, forming a circle to share their experiences. Muhayimana tried to sway many of the angry mothers with her story.

She was a pretty student when she left her forested village of Kibuye, near the Congolese border, 10 years ago to visit relatives in Rwanda's capital, Kigali. The day after she arrived on April 7, a government-led campaign to kill all Tutsis and moderate Hutus sparked mass slaughter.

Bodies rotted in the warm sun. Hutus who tried to protect Tutsi friends and relatives were also killed. While in Kigali, Muhayimana heard that her parents, four brothers and three sisters had been murdered.

Interahamwe militia members captured her. One after another, "as many as ants," she said, they took her into a dark room, pushed her up against the door and raped her. It was the first time she had had sex.

Three months into the carnage, a Tutsi-led army restored order and drove thousands of Hutu militiamen into eastern Congo. A militia member forced Muhayimana to accompany him, she said, saying, "now it is time for me to have a wife."

"I was suffering so much right until the moment I gave birth," nearly 16 months later on July 1, 1995, she said.

Her fear, her guilt, her suffering all ended after the baby was born. A miracle had happened, she said.

"The baby looked just like me," she said. "This man who captured me, he hated the child. He said I must have made the baby with someone else." She said this made her love the baby even more.

She named her son Claude Hope.

But there were also other feelings that made her accept her child. Claude Hope became her companion when she escaped to Rwanda in November 1997. She was pregnant again, and for the next six months, she walked with Claude Hope on her back.

Hundreds of other women -- both Hutu and Tutsi -- walked alongside her through the Congolese jungles, over hills, through water. Not all of them accepted her children. Some of the Hutus were angry that a Tutsi woman had slept with a Hutu man. The Tutsi women were angry that she had children with a Hutu militia member.

"Some people had different hearts. But the whole time I was feeling happy for the first time in so long," she said. "Here I was with my son, and another child inside me. We had walked all of that way together. My love really grew for them, and I just wanted to get back to Rwanda and be together."

She gave birth to her second child soon after she reached Kigali, on Aug. 21, 1998. She named her daughter Claudine Hope 2.

Children's Questions

"What kind of person are you?" the curly-haired Claude Hope asked his mother, softly but inquisitively, on a recent day. "Mama, why don't we have a dad?"

She placed Claude Hope on her lap as Claudine Hope, wearing an oversize skirt, played hopscotch nearby.

"Because of the war," she answered. "It was a terrible war in Rwanda, and now your father is the heavenly God. When we have a problem we can pray to him."

But Claude Hope persisted, each question making her feel more feverish. "Why don't we have any aunties?" he asked. "Why no uncles? No cousins? If a dad dies, does that mean everyone dies also?"

At his Kagugu Primary School, the teachers have yet to explain the genocide. The minister of education, Romain Murenzi, is working on a national curriculum that will explain the existence of children of rape in schools that will likely have several such students.

For now, Muhayimana repeats softly that there was a war and many people died, including their father and all of their relatives.

Christmas and Easter are when she feels most desperate. There are parties and relatives bringing gifts. The school fees are paid; it is a time for more family gatherings. Predictably, there are more questions.

"We don't have anyone to assist us," said her son, who is one of the top math students in his class. "We don't have a father to ask for sugar or to offer us many great things."

Sitting in her home of blue-walled cement and corrugated metal, Muhayimana, who lives on a hill on the outskirts of Kigali, says her son's questions would be even less kind if they lived in a different neighborhood. Some neighborhoods are filled with gossip about how certain children were conceived. At other times, family members have rejected the children of rape and shunned their desperate mothers.

Traumatized and red-eyed Alphonsina Mutuze, 30, first named her child Inkuba, or War. She knew her family would not accept that she was raped. She stripped naked and

attempted to drown herself in a river when she found out she was pregnant. A fisherman saved her. But, she said, he ended up forcing her to have sex in yet another rape. He said her body was payment for saving her life.

"I could not even die with this baby inside me," she said. "It was a curse that kept haunting me."

Sometimes, even today, she awakes resentful. It is during those days that she finds her temper short and she hits her 8-year-old child. A few times she has tried to give him away. Out of anger, she tells him lies: "You are not even mine. I picked you from the trash." Sometimes she cries for hours, unable to function.

"I really beat him for such petty things, and I feel can't love anyone," she whispered, covering her face with her hands as she sat in a clinic for rape victims called Association for the Widows of Genocide. "I try to love him. Sometimes, I don't feel like talking to anybody and I can't."

Mutuze recently became so depressed, seized with memories of constant gang rape, that she sought therapy at a center run by the association called Agahozo, "the place where tears are dried" in Kinyarwanda, the language spoken here. She has since renamed her son Tumusime, or Appreciate. And she is trying to bring her family to therapy sessions so they can accept Tumusime.

Muhayimana has no such worries, one of the few benefits of being without family. She lives in a little housing project provided to a small group of rape victims by a local aid group, Rwanda Women's Network, which set up what it calls a Village of Hope, with a health clinic and a tailoring workshop so the widows can make some money.

Muhayimana knows this is the place she will die.

Last year, she started getting sick from effects of AIDS. For most Rwandans, the life-saving AIDS drugs available in the West are too expensive and therefore impossible to obtain. Each question from Claude Hope about the past made Muhayimana realize she would have to explain to her children what happened before she dies. She hopes to live for at least two more years so she call tell Claude Hope when he is nearly 11, mature enough to try to understand.

Meanwhile, she confides her fears to another widow, feisty Laurencia Mukamuranga, 44, who has been her mentor. The large woman who goes around every morning giving bear hugs to her fellow widows is also the victim of gang rape, also HIV-positive.

"He is getting too curious," Muhayimana said, holding her friend's thick hand. "I will tell him everything someday soon. I won't conceal anything. I want them to hear it from me."

Make-Believe Father

On a recent sunny afternoon, under a canopy of banana trees, past a dirt path that leads to their home, Claude Hope was pretending to be the man of the house in a game of make-believe that brought smiles and laughter from his mother.

He helped Muhayimana cut the firewood. She has a part-time job carrying bricks and he helped her remove some bricks from her load and balance them on his own. She is losing weight quickly. Her pretty eyes peered out from her drawn face.

But Claude Hope fixed her tea in the evening. He escorted her to the gate to greet visitors. He asked her to dance to the Congolese music that pours out of a radio.

"The duties of a husband," he said proudly. "I like it. I am the man of the homestead."

Then he turned to his mother and made a promise as she bent down to wipe some dirt off of his shirt. "I will take my studies seriously and do well and then buy you a big car and big house," he said. "Or I will be a footballer and buy you many cars and too many houses."

"Okay," she laughed. "Let's prepare by reading a storybook."

At first, she was ashamed of her children. Now she hopes that they are not ashamed of her. She has not been able to tell them yet that she has AIDS.

"I am scared. I am feeling miserable," she said. "I don't want them to know."

Claude was already asked to repeat a year in school because he stayed home to care for his mother too often last year when her body went cold with chills.

She has already asked Mukamuranga, herself the mother of six children, to raise Claude and Claudine after she dies. Her friend has happily agreed.

She has not had Claude or Claudine tested for HIV. They appear healthy. But women at the clinic keep telling her she should.

"I know I should," she said putting her hands over her face. "But I can't know if they do. I am too scared."

For now, she just wants to enjoy the time they have together. Her neat home has lace curtains and three portraits of Mary holding baby Jesus. A sign shows a cartoon drawing of a mother and children with the inscription "Happy Days."

When the afternoon gets hot and she feels weak and her children are home from school, they often crowd onto her narrow foam mattress. They giggle. They cuddle. They seem like any loving family.

Sometimes she lies awake at night rehearsing what she will say to Claude Hope. "I will tell him it happened but God is not angry with me or with you. It was war. And God loves us." Other times she does not worry at all.

"Sometimes Claude turns to me and says, 'You are my mother,' " she said, as Claude Hope looked up at her with huge eyes. "But then he says, 'You are also our father.' That makes me so happy, like everything I went through was worth it in order to have them."