



My Neighbor My Killer - Movie Review - 2009 Rwanda Moves Towards Reconciliation

About.com Rating ★★★★★



By Jennifer Merin, About.com

The 1994 genocide of Tutsis by Hutus left Rwanda physically and psychically bereft and unable to function. The Gacaca Law mandated Tutsis and Hutus to reconcile--to forgive and move on with the rebuilding of the nation. Anne Aghion spent more than nine years chronicling the peace process to produce this brilliant documentary that brings us to a new level of understanding about the human capacity for creating mutuality.

Can We Forgive Those Who Trespass Against Us?

In 1994, in Rwanda, Hutu men rampaged through Tutsi homes slaughtering men, children and infants. They maimed and raped women--but left them alive to suffer having seen their husbands, children, parents and siblings beaten, bludgeoned, hacked to death. In the slaughter, three-quarters of the Tutsi population was exterminated.

If you were alive in 1994, news coverage of the crue, obscene bloodletting left indelible impressions in your mind. Humanitarians worldwide took note, but efforts to stop the massacre were too little, too late. After the fact, *Hotel Rwanda* and *Beyond The Gates* focused attention on the holocaust.

Perhaps because it was so intense, focused and relentless, the Rwandan genocide became for the world-at-large an alarming reminder--a symbol, if you will--of the human propensity for insane, unbridled cruelty. Whatever the immediate motivations, explanations or excuses might be--greed, revenge or traditional enmities the origins of which have been long forgotten--the behavior is irrational, aberrant and completely counter to what humans normally consider to be our specie's sacred gift: the ability to do good.

What happened in Rwanda raised deep concerns for thinking, caring people of all races, creeds and social classes. Genocide--when neighbors become killers--is as deeply troubling, as gripping, as seminal an issue as we humans face. It's a concern we can't quite remove from our psyches, even though we attempt to bury it hidden recesses we visit only when forced to. Well,

whenever Rwanda is mentioned, that deep concern wells up and demands attention.

Seeking Reconciliation

The tag line of *My Neighbor My Killer* is: When peace comes, how do you make it right again? The film shows the struggle of surviving Tutsis and guilty Hutus to turn the bloodsoaked turf into common ground on which they can live in peace. That goal is mandated by Gacaca, a law that sets up local tribunals in which citizen panels hear testimony from survivors and killers and pass judgement. Trials take place in fields, town squares, schoolyards. *My Neighbor My Killer* takes us to a rural community to watch the process. Villagers sit on the earth and we, through the camera's eye, sit among them. Surviving women tell how men slaughtered their families.

For example: "He," says a Hutu woman who'd been married to a Tutsi, pointing to her blood relative without looking at him, "took my baby from my back, threw him down and clubbed his head. He died instantly. He killed my seven children. I begged him to cut me, but he refused, saying I was dead already." Her simple statement--delivered without tears, rage or histrionics--evoke more gut-wrenching images in your mind than pictures of the massacre would. With her words replaying in your head, you listen to the man's response: "I did some things, but I did not kill her children," he avows. "But I was wrong. I am sorry for what happened." The tribunal deliberates and rules: "He is guilty and sentenced to eight years in prison. He has been in prison for nine years and has completed his sentence. He may go." The exchange occurs in variations, with the tribunal decreeing that both people move on with their lives. And, they do.

What Would You Do?

The scenario has neither histrionic nor humorous moments to distract you from observing and absorbing this rather matter of fact process that ends enmity and civil strife in an utterly inexplicable and amazing way. Aghion offers no celebrities, neither hero nor deus ex machina, no thrilling soundtrack to guide your reactions, so your thoughts are genuinely yours. While observing these people who've returned to daily life from the depths of hell, you can't help but wonder whether you could do what they're doing.

As part of your implicit self-examination, you wonder why and how Rwandans can follow this path. The answer is rather simple: they have no choice. For one thing, it's the law. But, beyond that, they must for purely practical reasons. They're post apocalyptic. The population is decimated and, most fundamentally, they've got to work together to get the fields plowed. It's live together or die.

However, *My Neighbor My Killer* isn't a preachy film. Aghion's pure cinema verite style lets the scenario and players deliver the message by example. The camera is used in such a purely, passively and intimately observational way, you barely sense it's there--until, midway through the film, you become aware that artists' hands guide composition and framing of shots that are so perfectly appropriate and make sure that mood-setting quality of light and colors are cleanly captured. Ultimately, the cinematography's stunning beauty confirms your role as witness, and reinforces your self-examination.

Setting Rwanda As An Example

In revealing the crucial nature of reconciliation in Rwanda, *My Neighbor My Killer* calls to mind other current conflicts around the world brought on by greed, zealotry, traditional enmities dating to causes that have long since been forgotten. The film's implicit mandate is that these conflicts--many of which are genocidal in nature and intent--be terminated before they succeed in exterminating us all. Rwanda is one patch of bloodsoaked earth that's being reclaimed as common ground. Earth is one planet that's our only common ground. We'd better learn to get along--to reconcile our differences by nonviolent means--or we're all at risk of termination. The last man standing, stands alone. without help to plow the fields.

It's clear why *My Neighbor My Killer's* debut is at the prestigious Human Rights Watch International Film Festival. This sobering reminder of our need to participate in the protection of human rights, including the right to life, wherever they are jeopardized should be seen by everyone who feels they have a stake in the future of humankind and our shared turf.

If You Like This Film, You May Also Like:

- * *Devil Came On Horseback*
- * *Darfur Now*
- * *Nanking*
- * *Standard Operating Procedure*
- * *Jesus Camp*

Film Details:

- * *Release Date: March 21, 2009, London*
- * *Running Time: 80 mins.*
- * *Parental Advisory: Content advisory for parents*
- * *Country: Rwanda*
- * *Language: Kinyarwanda, with English subtitles*
- * *Company: Gacaca Productions*