

Biomedical Engineering and Cultural Learning in Rwanda

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Today was a tough day. We went on a tour of the millennial village which included going to the local Rwanda Genocide Memorial and seeing the local Reconciliation Village. We started at the Memorial.

Before we entered we were given a debriefing by the keeper of the memorial. He told us that the memorial is a Catholic Church that the community used prior to 1994. He also gave us some background on the community. This eastern province had seen periods of fighting for 50 years before the 1994 genocide. In times past and even in 1992 the people who were being attacked could seek refuge in the Church. Logically after the President's plane was shot down and the broadcasts came out calling for the killing of all Tutsis, the local Tutsis sought refuge in the Church. When we were there the guide closed the wide-slat metal gate to the front of the Church to show us how they believed that this closed door would protect them. This time was different.

Some people took shelter directly inside those doors at the pews while others hid in the confessional to the left, a room with one small window to the outside. After people were killed outside the Church and the perpetrators believed enough people had gathered within the Church, they attacked with traditional weapons like machettes. These weapons were defeated by the Tutsis who wielded sticks and stones. The perpetrators returned the next day with more militia, guns and grenades.

The wide-slat metal door has a large dent in one side and the bars are pulled apart at that place too. You can look up and see the sunlight coming through the overhang in front of the Church because it is littered with bullet holes. The militia shot the people through the door and the window into the confessional. They threw grenades that destroyed parts of the flooring and walls.

We walked inside to a similar sight. The ceiling had more holes than I could count and even Virgin Mary was missing a chunk out of her shoulder. Our guide told us that the perpetrators decided that her features were "too Tutsi" so she too had to die.

The perpetrators only entered the Church once they believed the people were dead. They came in to guarantee everyone had been killed. When they entered they continued to rape and torture anyone who was still alive. On the altar our guide showed us the weapons they used- small knives and machetes. The modes of killing and torture were further illustrated in the basement of the Church that they built for the memorial. They have placed various skulls with different types of damage to show the different ways they killed. Beneath the case of hundreds of skulls was a coffin that contained the remains of a woman who was so brutally attacked that they

use her as a representation of what hundreds of thousand of women faced during the Genocide.

Everything in the memorial was shocking and extrememly emotional, but the one display that helped me understand the number of people masacred was the display of all of the clothes from the bodies on the pews. This was a good size church with many pews and each one was piled high with clothes. Baby clothes even. 10,000 people were killed in the Church and another 40,000 were brought there to be buried after being killed in other parts of the district. It is hard to imagine 50,000 people being killed, but it is much easier to grasp the scope of 50,000 when you see so many clothes.

The last part of the memorial were the outside mass graves. One of them was open so that you could descend into the grave and see the shelves of coffins as well as skulls and bones piled high. It was unbelievable. It is hard to imagine how terrified these people must have been or the amount of pain the survivors feel after losing their family, friends, and neighbors all at the same time and in such a violent manner.

The man who led us through the memorial was clearly pained discussing the Genocide, but he did not spare us a single detail. He recounted everything as did the creators of the memorial site. It is an incredible display of the country's determination to never forget the atrocity.

Although I know it is true that those who do not know their history are doomed to repeat it is true, it is hard for me to imagine preserving and relieving such an atrocity with so much detail. Every person we met who spoke about the Genocide also looked pained, but told us what we needed to know and also encouraged us to be ambassadors and tell our friends and neighbors so that this never happens again. That is my goal in sharing these painful details with you.

After we left the memorial we went to the local reconciliation village. We spoke to a man who was a perpetrator of genocide and a woman who saw her whole family massacred. They now live next to each other. They talked to us about their experience and journey to forgiveness. Both of them said that forgiveness was not easy on the first day, but after speaking with two Priests they were able to gain some understanding of what caused the merciless killing and keep their eyes on the future of their shared country.

It was clear to me that they were pained telling us their story, but what was also clear is that they have made reconciliation possible and given their country a new future. These survivors and perpetrators are determined to never forget, but to also rebuild and make a better country for their children and they have done just that. All of the children were dancing and playing together, I could not have told you whose child was whose.

We were able to ask the community questions after they spoke. I could not help but wonder what made the woman want to come back to Rwanda after she witnessed this tragedy and lost her family and home. Her answer was simple, the country was under new rule and no longer violent. I don't think I would have come back. I don't think I would be strong enough to face the place that is the scene of the greatest nightmare.

While we were there they also put on a traditional performance complete with drumming, singing, and dancing. Before we left the children came into the crowd and pulled us onto the dance floor to dance with them. The children were so lively and happy. I was also taught some great moves- I think the little girl dancing with me was surprised by how poor my dance skills are.

The dynamic between intense sadness and incredible joy seems to be a trend here. The more I learn about the genocide and the more memorials I go to the more I cannot understand the immense tragedy and how you deal with a community that is so traumatized. However, I look around on the streets and see a country that is so joyful. I see people laughing, hugging, and smiling. It is such a beautiful community of people. I also come back to the language and common greetings like "peace?" which is answered by saying "peace" and the good morning greeting "did you survive the night?". I can't help but wonder if these greetings were a result of Rwanda's violent past.

We went to the large Memorial the next day in Kigali. It gave a lot more of the history including France's involvement in funding \$12 million in guns and equipment and training, the world wide lack of intervention before and during the Genocide, and the trials that took place following the Genocide. There are many lessons we can learn from this history; however, the frequent occurrence of genocide means that we have a long way to go in our ability to prevent these atrocities. Battling these facts and causes are my first steps to doing my part in prevention.

I feel more equipped living in this community now that I understand their past better. I hope to learn more as my journey continues.