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The challenge of re-counting/re-telling memory

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Panel: Politics and prose. The author discusses how the current political landscape affects their work.

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The challenge of re-counting/re-telling memory

By Roland Rugero (Burundi)

The debate was long. And wonderful. In the Italian-speaking part of Switzerland, where the Babel festival aimed to survey the new writers from Africa, and to where I came from Burundi. Dorcy Rugamba came from Rwanda—an actor, a dramaturge, a stage director, a fugitive from the 1994 genocide that took his family. Yet he told me: "We can't be defined strictly by our suffering, otherwise that may eventually become our only identity ..."

Later we met again in Geneva, at the Maison Rousseau et de la Littérature, to talk about the challenges of "living memory" in our work.

I come from a country where one learns nothing, either in high school or at the university, about the history of Burundi between 1962 and today-- unless it is a date when the xth republic was founded, or the date of a particular political murder, or when such-and-such agreement was signed, such-and-such summit meeting held, or the date of a cease-fire. 50 years or more, summed up in cold dates. For it's quite hazardous to interject a comment, or to explain the whys and the hows of tragedies, of events. This history is passed over quickly and silently, nearly in embarrassment, the unsaid upheld over and over again in the name of the imperative *ntakuzura akaboze*, meaning, do not unearth that which has rotted. Except that this 'rot' is to a people what manure is to a field: without it the country runs the risk to remain barricaded inside its assorted 'killer identities,' in commemorations-as-revenge-rituals, in its vindictive memory. Without this 'rot,' the country grows feebly, forgetting to tend to its roots. Without this 'rot' young people question everything incessantly, devoid of reference yet wanting to understand, asking about how and why, how come they have inherited such grievous history. Like the infant in the short story *The Child and the Smile*.¹

Writing thus becomes a matter of urgency. Transcribing the memory of our grandparents who are disappearing one by one, some from having lived too much and others from having lived too poorly. Writing becomes urgent, a call to witness, to bring the reader to a communion with a people that, for all its varied identities, has lived through the same mistakes, same barbarisms, same questions.

Writing becomes a witness for our time and to our struggles. In particular those struggles of the *l'Entre deux mondes* ['between-two-worlds'] spelled out nearly 40 years ago by Father Michel Kayoya²-- the fight between tradition and the present.

Memory and Identity

Beyond the potential—and recurrent—confusion between memory and History, a doubt arises, however: what if, in repeating what has occurred (in the past), we are in fact participating in repeating that which was the cause of the grief in the first place? For, as Dorcy Rugamba reminds us, "in our countries, death, before becoming a physical fact, is symbolically carried by words."

Words taken out of context, words of double meaning, words that conceal, words that sneak, words that hit, Kirundi-words, French-words, our-words, their-words... Those words: to dwell with our history, both the present and the distant, to re-tell them, to write them, to play them, to read them, to sing them—yet can we take the risk of perpetuating the same ills of division and egoism we had aimed to denounce, to lay bare, in the first place?

And it is here that the job arises in all its complexity: to create a new language.

To ensure that writing participates in forming another way of telling (the story of) life. With new-words that will

1 The short story has been published in the anthology *"Émergences - Renaître ensemble"* (Sembura, 2011), after an award on the 6th Francophony Games, Beirut (Lebanon)

2 *Dictionary of African Biography* (Oxford University Press, Inc. - 2010)

Speak to a shared fate, no matter what cost, that will ascertain the passage from generation to generation, between that of our parents, mute with suffering and guilt and ours, fervent with questions and avid for movement/travel ?

The writer is a smuggler. His mission isn't to cure, nor to relieve. Only to create new words.

Here then, ladies and gentlemen, its rough dress reeking of eucalyptus and of the smoky valleys in the country of sacred drums, is the policy matrix holding in place my writing work.