

## AGAINST ALL ODDS

It was 1993 in Burundi, East Africa. Everyone knew the situation after the death of Melchior Ndadaye, "Hero of Democracy," was going to get worse. Instability would come to the whole country, and tension between the two largest ethnicities, Hutu and Tutsi, would be the source of insecurity. Tutsi were chasing and killing Hutu people in different regions and not only that, but taking everything from them. "Where are they?" – you could get this in the streets, in the neighborhood in Mugongo-Manga, popularly known as Mugongo, a commune in Bujumbura Rural Province.

This is where the story begins: in the Tutsi region of Mugongo with no mercy for a Hutu life – only a few Tutsi in the community with a sense of humor and caring hearts during such a critical situation, where no one could escape the Hutu hunt.

Lives of Hutu people were at stake mainly in regions populated mostly by Tutsi. However, at the same time, a surprising event happened – and to this day it is recorded in the hearts of those that heard about the story because it was extraordinary that such an event could happen in a Tutsi region where many Hutu lives were vanished because of political tensions.

A well-known Tutsi leader, an *umushingantahe*, who led a group of other leaders, known as *abashingantahe*, became a refuge to a Hutu family he didn't know that well. Among his values was saving lives, however in such a situation what he did was unbelievable. He knew this family was going to be killed in a blink of an eye if he didn't intervene, beating all odds a Tutsi leader brought a hunted Hutu family to his home to be their shelter – and none of his community knew that he brought in the Hutu family to protect them.

A few days later, in the tragedy of political tension and ethnic hate, a group of Tutsi heard rumors about this leader that he protects Hutus whereas he was expected, of course, to be the lead or example to his people in raising more awareness around hating Hutu people and killing them and harassing them. What was even worse was not only did this leader decide to hide a Hutu family, but he helped them to look after their belongings and their cattle. No one in his village knew he was responsible for such a thing. They couldn't, because in that period that would have meant his own death.

As the clock ticked on, the lives of Hutu people were getting into more trouble. In that situation if you were a Hutu, you couldn't tell a Tutsi that "we are all Burundians" or "we should be friends." It was too late for them to settle this kind of hate. Tutsi people made arrangements to riot against this Tutsi leader who was not supposed to be a Messiah for a Hutu family or guardian of their wealth. The Tutsi group headed to the leader's home with too much anger and pressure,, and the target was killing this Hutu family and then demanding of this leader, how dare he do such a terrible thing.

However the leader was determined to save this family no matter any circumstances. The group of Tutsi tried to forcefully enter the leader's compound and did their best to grab out the Hutu family he was alleged to be a savior for, but the leader wasn't easy going – "over my dead body! None of you can enter my house, you must kill me before entering my house."

The group of Tutsi left with too much anger and confusion. It was their only option, although they were not convinced enough to not come back and make the situation even worse for this Tutsi leader who was insane in their eyes. A furious day passed like that, leaving everyone in deep fear. Of course this leader's family wasn't informed about everything, but the community had no idea - so this was complicated to both sides as they tried to figure out what to do next and how to get away with the community from knowing the truth behind the scenario.

Bringing this story in the middle of the events, I'll remind you that in such times Hutu families were killed, harassed, and lost their loved ones. Others ran away from these regions because there was too much tension for the sake of their lives and their loved ones. Getting a leader who is a Tutsi surprisingly saving a Hutu family in that period was like an abomination – treason – or else you were taken as a mole because once you fall into Tutsi hands it was like prey getting in front of a lion and expect it to babysit it; it was obviously impossible for them to leave you breathing.

A thoughtful mind is always deep and critically thinking in different angles even in the midst of the night. "We must get a place you can shift to before they get back" the leader mentioned firmly to the Hutu family he was hiding. Following the riot, nobody knew what was next. The leader was going to have to either turn the Hutu family over to the angry mob or accept to share the same death sentence with them. As a well-known leader with values to protect his community, he came up with a plan. "You have to go to another region where there's not too much tension and I'll keep all of your things safe for you until the situation gets back to normal," he said hopefully.

He felt saving lives was much more important than ethnic tensions and wouldn't allow these differences to take a human's life for granted. Here is how the shifting plan started: at one o'clock in the morning, they were all awake and the leader's children were with them on the road toward Imbo region around Isale. For their safety, the leader too was part of this journey of life and death. This was engraved in the Hutu family's hearts, not forgetting that he advised them to leave behind their cattle for camouflage, reason being if they had everything with them anyone could tell that they were running away from something.

He kept everything for this family as he promised until they returned. They couldn't thank him enough for being faithful to them and their belongings while they were not even around to check on anything or to look after their cattle. Nothing was harmed in the name of this leader, who told everyone that the cattle and property were his own.

After some time, when things calmed down and the story became known, people asked the leader why he saved lives of a Hutu family that was not his ethnic group, and guess what was his very quick answer? "I didn't save the lives of Hutus, I saved the lives of human beings." This amazed everyone who had a chance to listen to this story. What was hard for people in the community to believe was one putting his life at stake because of one family he wasn't related to and didn't have a business with, but instead using his power and privilege to act like a human.

Being the change you want to see, putting life in danger, may not be the only way to do the right thing, but I do believe this was an incredible move to leave behind the legacy and mark every of his works in many hearts even if he is not alive today. That family and their grandchildren will always celebrate him for saving their lives, and whoever will hear this story, no matter how many decades will come to pass, this leader will always live in their hearts and memories. The *umushingantahe* I've decided to write about is a father, a grandfather to many Tutsi and Hutu families now. But most importantly, he is my grandfather. Yes, this is the story of my own grandfather. Writing about his tremendous works is my dream, telling everyone how this generous man stood out to make a difference even in a critical situation where he could have lost his life. This can lead or set an example for this era's generation and the coming ones. Colors, ethnicities, languages, tribes, clans, and other differences should not divide us; we should celebrate our diversity together. And everyone's efforts towards a positive change can make a difference.