



The Capture of Kabuga Frees Me to Hope Again

By John-Allan Namu



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News of the arrest in Paris, France of Felicien Kabuga, the man long accused of funding the genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda 26 years ago, has now reached a one-bedroom house in Pangani estate, Nakuru, Kenya. Josephat Gichuki, the tenant in this threadbare home, calls me to ask if I have heard the news. We talk now and again, our conversations mostly prompted by the slightest of wisps of news about Rwanda's octogenarian outlaw. Today I can hear excitement in his voice. I ask to interview him on his thoughts and call back eight minutes later.

"I am very, very happy. This is important to me because there is no office I have not gone to seeking justice", he says. Josephat has cause to be happy. His younger brother, Kenyan journalist William Munuhe was murdered hours before he was set to lead Kenyan and US authorities to Felicien, Kabuga on January 16th 2003. Kenyan Police first claimed that he had killed himself by lighting a charcoal burner and inhaling carbon monoxide fumes. Yet the evidence found in his Karen home told a completely different story.

Josephat has been searching for the truth for the last 17 years. Just like that, he very possibly could get the closure he has sought for close to two decades. Pushing for the Kenyan government to

provide him with the answers his family needed hasn't been good for the Gichukis. His father passed away in 2018. Gichuki says that his father was "distraught" that he "struggled so hard to raise a child only to see him killed" and no one to answer for it. "Heartbreak killed my father", he says. Almost as if his mouth was working on muscle memory, he fires off nearly every attempt he has made to get a response from the government, as well as every missed opportunity.

"[Former President] Kibaki was a guest of the Rwanda government in 2004. We expected him to say something. He didn't. In 2014 at the 20th commemoration of the genocide, [President] Uhuru was a guest of the Rwanda government. We expected him to say something. He didn't".

Neither one of us would be surprised by this. The Kenyan government has long denied any knowledge about the whereabouts of Felicien Kabuga and the crimes that have been linked to him. The day of his capture doesn't seem to inspire any volunteering of information either. "He isn't our criminal", I can almost hear some local public relations spin doctor say. Would Kabuga's arrest matter to a population whose median age is 19 anyway? It should, in the way that all life-altering events do matter.

May 16th, 1994

A situation report issued daily by the United Nations Mission in Rwanda (UNAMIR) rattles off statistics on food, water and fuel rations, a rundown of the fighting between the RPF (Rwandese Patriotic Front) and the RGF (Rwandese Government Forces) on this day. Fighting between current President Paul Kagame's forces (RPF) and government troops was focused in the north of the country and in Kigali, the small nation's capital. Journalists had visited various refugee camps to look into distribution of food rations. A meeting brokered to discuss a ceasefire took place at the Hotel Diplomat. The RPF didn't send any representatives. It makes for a mundane reading of the facts about one of the worst tragedies to have ever taken place on the face of the earth. Yet every detail is important. This one line sticks out:

"HA (Humanitarian activities) team held a meeting with the OPS (operations) officer of the Gendarmerie, GSO II of the RGF and representative of the Interahamwe and the militia, concerning the evacuation of orphans from Giimba and Gitega. Numerous problems were posed regarding the evacuation of orphans".

This statement meant two things: first, that any humanitarian aid organisation working in Rwanda at the time had to work with the approval of the Rwanda government. That is normal. Secondly, a representative of the [Interahamwe](#), a brutal, bloodthirsty militia responsible for the murder of hundreds of thousands of Tutsis and moderate Hutus was also at the table. That should strike out any doubts of how central it was as a player in the civil war.

26 years later, in the middle of the second month of Rwanda's [Kwibuka](#) commemorations, it also spotlights how important the arrest of the Interahamwe's chief benefactor Felicien Kabuga is bringing the arc of history that much closer to the endgame; bending it towards justice. Kabuga bought hundreds of thousands of machetes that were given to these men. He owned media houses that trumpeted the "cut down the tall trees" narratives that captured a misled public's imagination that their brothers and sisters were actually vermin. He was at the heart of the plans to eliminate more than 20 per cent of Rwanda's population. He was a rich man whose money bought him 26 years of freedom - in Kenya, the Democratic Republic of Congo and France.

Few people have walked the earth freely after committing the crimes that he is accused of. Many of the main actors in the holocaust were arrested, tried and hung. Dictators responsible for bringing untold suffering to their citizens have risen and fallen in the time since Felicien Kabuga escaped

imminent capture (and possibly a similar fate) by the RPF in the early days of June 1994, starting a 26-year life on the run that ended on May 16th 2020.

Kabuga traveled to Switzerland first, where he was denied entry, before coming to Kenya. Here, he was received with open arms. He and his family bought properties in Kilimani, owned fancy cars and lived quiet lives between 1994 and 1997. His children went to school here. He registered his businesses here and was well on the way to gaining a foothold in the Kenya-Rwanda logistics industry when he was arrested and jailed at the Kilimani Police Station. He was released at the behest of very senior Kenyans including a current Member of Parliament. He would go underground, and official accounts denying his presence in Kenya would begin.

May 16th, 2012

My wife and our two children had just moved into what would be our home for the next one month. I had been investigating Felicien Kabuga's whereabouts and my sources and I had begun receiving threats. We were in the process of getting passports for our two young children just in case we would need to leave the country. We had already pulled them out of school and my wife had to take leave from work. Meanwhile, I needed to keep on the track of the story. I had turned in the first draft and it was decided that I would need to travel to Rwanda to deepen it.

I had picked up the thread of Kabuga's sojourn in Kenya in December of 2011. I would read about the man whose money and beliefs sowed bitterness in the hearts of his countrymen through his radio station, Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines in the years before the start of the genocide. I visited Kigali Prison to speak to a woman who worked for Kabuga at RTLM as Rwanda commemorated 18 years since Kabuga and senior Rwandan government officials plotted a genocide.

I pored over documents linking Kenyan military officers to a cabal of Kabuga's protectors in Kenya. I interviewed former senior government officials in confidence about the man's whereabouts. I read books about the genocide, spoke to foreign correspondents and senior Kenyan journalists who had covered the genocide. I spoke to genocide survivors, broke bread with young Kenyans working in Rwanda and watched in horror news of a helicopter crash that would kill, among others, Kenya's internal security minister, George Saitoti. I had planned to interview Saitoti when I got back to Kenya on the subject of Kabuga. I chased leads that led nowhere, and received some that opened up even more information about what Kabuga was up to while in Kenya.

I also interviewed the former Prosecutor General of Rwanda, Martin Ngoga, about Kabuga's whereabouts. Earlier in the year I had received a photograph of a man who my sources claimed was Kabuga. I showed it to Ngoga, as well as to the lady I interviewed in Kigali Prison, and to a doctor who it was claimed had treated Kabuga in Nakuru, among other people. With the exception of the doctor (who passed away weeks after my documentary aired), everyone else was agreed on the identity of the man in the photo. It was the photo that would cast doubt on a story I had toiled so long to tell.

The man in this photo was produced at a press conference addressed by former Kenya Police Spokesman Eric Kiraithe. Daniel Ngera, a businessman from Isiolo, had been forced into the frame by what Kiraithe called shoddy journalism on my part. I couldn't respond because I wasn't there to do so. My wife, our children and I had left the country the Friday before the story ran, and were just settling into life on the run. My heart sank and my stomach turned. I could never have imagined that an error on my part would serve as a distraction from the existing facts about one of Rwanda's most dangerous men.

The month that followed was one of the darkest in my life. I spent it fighting anxiety attacks. Would I

have a job to come back to? My wife had already lost her job because she couldn't explain in detail why she had to be away from work for three months. All through this, I was trying to reassure my wife that everything would be alright. To be honest, she did most of the reassuring.

Fortunately, I had a boss—Linus Kaikai—who stood by me, and (I hope) believed in the integrity of my intentions and the rigour I had applied to the story. I will always regret having exposed Mr Ngera, a man I had never met, to that kind of ridicule—even if I hadn't set out to do so, much less plot to pass him off as a genocidaire. Yet for all the efforts that my team and I made, or the shame that Mr Ngera was exposed to or the anxious days and weeks that followed, this was the least important part of the story of Kabuga's life as a fugitive.

Kabuga's freedom, enabled by people in different countries across the world, was a slap in the face of every Rwandese citizen; those who lost lives during the genocide, those who have endured life without loved ones, even those who were brought to justice years before he will see the inside of a courtroom. The soil that turned red and the rivers in which bodies floated, the churches that were turned into slaughterhouses, all of the history that heaves with the weight of this dark chapter deserves a twist like this one. The hilltops from where the cries of the innocent rang out 26 years ago should hear news of Kabuga's capture loudly beamed.

Back to May 16th, 2020

My day draws to a close with a call from my mother. She called to say she'd seen the news about Kabuga's arrest, and that she was proud of me for playing my part in bringing to justice an evil man. "You may not have succeeded, but you did your best—and I feel vindicated on your behalf". Those words wrung out a bitterness I've carried for eight years because of how my attempt to find a bad man ended. If only for tonight, I feel a lightness I haven't felt whenever I have thought about Kabuga. Earlier, Josephat had ended our call with the same note of hope that he had had for answers 17 years ago. Maybe the request for a public inquest into his brother's murder will be heeded now that the chief suspect in that murder is behind bars. Maybe not. All he and his family have wanted is justice. Josephat was 33 years old when his younger brother William was murdered because some people in Kenya chose to stand on the side of a butcher than with the millions for whom Kabuga's crimes can never be fully atoned. His hope may have wavered many a time, but on this day, May 16th 2020, his ageing eyes opened to see the day when an ageing criminal's luck ran out. The end of Felicien Kabuga's freedom has freed Josephat and I to nurse the hope that justice does not have a sell-by-date. I know we must nurse this flame with care and not shout too loudly, lest we extinguish it before we have fought the many other battles ahead of us. Hope, it seems, may actually spring eternal.

Who'd have thought it?

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