

# Kwibuka27 : How Aloys Rwamasirabo fought to keep the Nyange memory alive

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**Nyange Parish became known for the bloody massacres which claimed between 2,000 and 3,000 lives.**

What would you do if a collapsed church-turned-mass grave, where five of your children and dozens of loved ones are buried, is about to be cleared to pave way for a bigger modern church?

If it is the only memory left, you would definitely fight to death to preserve it and, that is exactly the distance Aloys Rwamasirabo was willing to go, to ensure that the Nyange Parish Genocide memorial site in Ngororero District, Western Province, is kept intact.

Rwamasirabo, who lost nine of his 10 children, his mother and two sisters in the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi, dedicated his life to the preservation of the site, where five of his children were killed, when Father Athanase Seromba, ordered that the church where Tutsis were hiding, is razed down by a bulldozer.

The Nyange massacres are some of the most heinous recorded, where Seromba, connived with the then local officials and ordered a civil works bulldozer on April 16,

1994, to raze down the church with thousands of people inside, after an initial attempt to torch it down failed.



Aloys Rwamasirabo lost nine children and other family members during the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi.

Nyange Parish became known for the bloody massacres which claimed between 2,000 and 3,000 lives. Seromba was sentenced to life in prison by the International Criminal Tribunal of Rwanda (ICTR) after he was found guilty of Genocide crimes.

The government has since built a memorial at the church, but it took decades of fighting

by Rwamasirabo to ensure that the site is preserved as the Roman Catholic Church came up with plans to build a new church on the same site.

“My understanding was that these individuals were intent on erasing the memory. The memorial site made them uncomfortable,” says Rwamasirabo, who rallied other genocide survivors to ensure that the Nyange memory is preserved.

Born in what was Kivumu Commune in 1956, Rwamasirabo, now 65, was a successful businessman when the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi broke out.

Rwamasirabo had 10 children - 3 boys and 7 girls. When the killings broke out on April 7, Tutsi in the area started fleeing, the majority of them heading to the church, hoping to be protected by the priests.

His children were among those who sought refuge at the church. He was also brought to the place on April 13, 1994 by some friends who were hiding him.

“The oldest was 17, in secondary school and the second born too was in secondary school. They were both in senior three. The youngest was two and was also killed”

“Only one child survived, my son, who at the time was at school in senior two, in Ntendezi, then Cyangu, where he was when the Genocide broke out. I thought he had also died,” recalls Rwamasirabo.

His second born was killed on May 27, 1994, after he refused to reveal the whereabouts of his father when government soldiers came looking for him. The family had scattered as they tried to hide.

Rwamasirabo would be rescued by Rwan-

da Patriotic Front (RPF-Inkotanyi) fighters on June 21, 1994 as they advanced on the southern and western parts of the country, as Interahamwe militia and government soldiers fled towards the then Zaire.

When the RPF-Inkotanyi ended the genocide and normalcy restored, Rwamasirabo temporarily resumed with business but it didn't take long before he started to realise that the site at Nyange Church, where many were killed, including his own children, was becoming abandoned.

“I saw people grazing goats here, grass had overgrown due to human fat. I felt it was disrespectful for the victims and I said what if these people by any miracle resurrected and asked me what I was doing to preserve their memory as someone who survived?” says Rwamasirabo

“I wouldn't have anything to say,” he adds, pointing out that from 2000, he decided to be taking care of this site using his own resources.

At first, he would deploy his farm workers to do the cleaning and maintenance but then he thought it would make sense if he involved other genocide survivors.

After one year doing it alone, he decided to call other genocide survivors and asked them why they are leaving him to work on the site alone, as if he is the only one who had remains of his people buried there.

“They heeded to my call. That was in 2001. About 100 of them responded to my call and showed up but since many of them were from far off places like Mukura, only 60 of us would be readily available,”

Rwamasirabo proposed that they come up

with an association, with the aim of preserving the memory at Nyange.

The association grew but some people kept falling off and eventually they remained just 21 of them but none could match his determination.

Rwamasirabo and his peers fought to ensure that the memorial at Nyange is preserved as many other individuals schemed to have it either removed or made insignificant by building over it.

“I remember at some point there was a white priest who was deployed here but we realised he had the ideology of Interahamwe. We protested and he was removed,”

“They brought another priest, who had come from Congo. Though he was Tutsi, he felt that the memorial will always be a stain on the parish and he proposed to rebuild the church as it was before. We refused,” Rwamasirabo says.

The priest went to the district and several meetings were convened by local government officials and security organs over the matter.

The priest would say in several meetings that he (Rwamasirabo) had turned the church site where thousands were buried into his personal asset (Akarima ke).

“I said to myself, if the meetings really are about me, why don’t they invite me to hear my side of the story, instead of hearing it from other people?”

When the district lobbying failed, the priest took the issue to the diocese and the monsignor sent two priests who were also survivors from the area, to go and convince Rwamasirabo and others about the church project.

“They came and talked to me. I asked one of the priests I knew, who was born near that bridge (Nyabarongo bridge), if he had no shame coming to me with the suggestion, despite the remains of his relatives, which were retrieved from the roadside where they were buried, resting at the same site,”

“He said that he was aware of that, but the Church project was more important. Eventually, he was transferred to Nyundo and a new priest, Father Tuyishime, was brought here,” he says.

Rwamasirabo said that Father Jean-Baptiste Tuyishime came with a different project proposal, whereby a storeyed building would be built at the site, with the ground floor serving as a genocide memorial, while the upper floor would be the church.

The new priest met the survivors and other officials at the site and presented the proposal. The survivors still rejected it. They wanted the memorial to stay in place as it was and be preserved instead.

The standoff remained until 2013 when a team of five Members of Parliament visited Nyange to investigate the issue. The MPs met all parties at the site and the Chief Priest presented the project.

“He even said that they have the budget for the project and would not be looking for money. Some people were convinced and were beginning to appreciate the project. The group was led by the MP Innocent Kayitare, who said that they needed to hear from me as well,”

“When I was asked to speak, I still opposed the project and said that if they are really interested in building a genocide memorial for

us, they should do so on the site and build the church on another plot since they had a big piece of land,” he says.

Erasing the memory

Rwamasirabo categorically told the gathering that what they really wanted to do with the church project was to erase the memory of the horrific events that happened at Nyange. The meeting ended without an amicable agreement.

The issue was tabled to higher authorities and later Fr Tuyishime called Rwamasirabo and informed him that he had given up on the proposed project because he feared ‘being beaten’.

Architectural plans for the church and for the memorial, by the district, were being developed separately.

In another meeting convened at the district, Rwamasirabo was asked about the size of the memorial they wanted at the site.

He told the meeting that there is a designated place (the church), where the massacres happened, which they had fenced off and they wished the memorial would cover that particular space.

The Chief Priest got angry and told Rwamasirabo that they fenced off land that was not theirs, in the first place.

Incensed by the priest, Rwamasirabo also assured the priest that their loved ones were killed on the land in question, where the church was, as priests looked on and hence it should be considered government land.

“After the meeting people came to me saying that I had addressed the priest in a disrespectful manner but I did not care at all because he was also insensitive to our concerns,”

he says.

The standoff continued as the priest ordered that a perimeter fence be built and the trees which Rwamasirabo and other survivors had planted around the site be cut.

The trees were indeed cut and carried away and upon finding out, Rwamasirabo stood in the way. In the meantime, the memorial site plan by the district was advancing fast as the contractor started work.

“We are really grateful to the contractor, Kaneza. He went on to build the memorial, up to the ring beam, even without waiting to be advanced money by the district,” Rwamasirabo says.

At this point, he had created more enemies and had many people fighting him, left, right and centre, including those who he implicated in the killings or stood in the way of their attempts to erase the memory.

“I was determined. I said this could be the reason I survived,” Rwamasirabo says, taking pride in the fact that the memorial is now complete and stands out among those where the true memory of what happened was preserved as it was, thanks to the government.

Wanted dead or alive

Rwamasirabo was a successful businessman with a personal vehicle in 1994, but it all went down the drain as he fought to remain alive when the Genocide against the Tutsi broke out.

“One of the people who were hunting me at the time was Gaspard Kanyarukiga, who was sentenced by the International Criminal Tribunal of Rwanda in Arusha. He came here and said that he wanted me dead and that whoever would bring my dead body would re-

ceive a Rwf400,000 cash prize,” Rwamasirabo recalls.

Kanyarukiga, who hailed from Nyange, is still serving his 30-year sentence which he was handed in in 2010 and affirmed on appeal in 2012. He is held in a United Nations facility in Benin.

Another businessman Tugirimana Cyriacque also put money on Rwamasirabo’s head, but luckily, he survived but they killed nine of his children, his mother and two sisters.

His survival was a combination of luck and sheer determination, dodging death on several occasions until he was rescued by RPF-Inkotanyi.

He was among the people who had barricaded themselves in the church when Fr Seromba and the then sous-bourgmestre Joseph Habiyambere ordered soldiers to shoot inside the church and when they still refused to open, a bulldozer was ordered to come and raze down the facility, with the people inside.

When it got late, the workers who were razing the church left, leaving behind one part of the church standing and that is how he and a few others managed to crawl out. The bulldozer returned the next day April 17, 1994, to complete the job.

Jean-Damascene Ndahimana, an employee of the National Commission for the Fight against the Genocide (CNLG) says that the Nyange Genocide Memorial holds crucial history of the horrific killings that happened in the area.

“On April 11, 1994, the bourgmestre of Commune Kivumu, Gregoire Ndahimana, convened a meeting and directed that all the Tutsi in the commune should flee to Nyange Parish for their own safety,”

“When they came in big numbers, the area was cordoned off by gendarmes to make sure that nobody leaves, so that they are killed in one place. On April 16, the razing of the church started. Over 2,000 people were killed inside the church,” Ndahimana says.

Like Fr Seromba, Ndahimana was also sentenced to 25 years in prison by the ICTR. He had been initially handed 15 years but the Appeals Chamber increased his sentence to 25 years due to the high degree of culpability.

The memorial site has 7,798 remains buried there, of people mainly killed in Kivumu Commune, one of the areas where the killings lasted very many days.

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