



'He was trying to unite Hutu and Tutsi, while the government depends on divide and rule'
Friend of Kizito Mihigo

by the notion of collective Hutu guilt, shocked when the government urged Hutus too young to have taken part in the genocide to publicly apologise for their supposed crimes. In March 2014, he brought out a song that broke every official taboo. While the UN and human rights investigators agree the RPF slaughtered tens of thousands of Hutus in Rwanda and neighbouring DRC before and after the genocide, Kagame has always insisted these killings were limited and carried out in the heat of emotion. Kizito's song *The Meaning of Death* challenged that narrative, calling on Rwandans to show empathy to both victims of the genocide and "revenge killings", as these deaths are termed. Eyes shut, clutching a rosary, the famous *rescapé* sings that death is equally terrible for all.

The song transformed Kizito's standing in the Hutu community, which had seen him as a regime puppet, but triggered a dizzy-fall from grace. Detained without access to a lawyer, he was told that the president had not appreciated his latest composition and that if he didn't apologise, he was a dead man. Panicking, he obeyed. The next glimpse television viewers got of the golden boy, his wrists were handcuffed and he was being presented by police to a gaggle of journalists, charged with treason.

Admitting to having been in telephone contact with Rwanda's exiled opposition, he was sentenced to 10 years in jail for conspiring against the government. Kizito swapped the designer suits of the Rwandan socialite for the pink uniform convicts are allotted in Rwanda. But prison only radicalised him.

Rubbing shoulders with the kind of men who had killed his father, he began to understand Hutu grievances. Grateful inmates dubbed him "the Dove" in tribute to his message of peace and the doves that mysteriously came to perch on the window sill of his cell. Hungry for debate, he used a phone smuggled into prison to reach out to Rwandan activists and western human rights groups abroad. He was haunted by a sense he was running out of time and tapped out an autobiography, sending chapters to those he trusted. "I think they may kill me," he told a

ABOVE
Kizito Mihigo studied music in Paris, and returned to his country determined to promote peace.



ABOVE
'Hotel Rwanda' hero Paul Rusesabagina arrives at court. Simon Wohlfahrt/AFP

LEFT
Images of a few of the thousands who died in 1994, at a memorial centre in Kigali. AP

Timeline

1916 Belgian forces first occupy Rwanda. They govern indirectly through Tutsi kings, who treat the Hutu ethnic group as second-class citizens.

1962 Rwanda wins independence from Belgium. Grégoire Kayibanda, a Hutu, becomes president. Many Tutsis flee.

1973 Kayibanda is ousted by a fellow Hutu, Juvénal Habyarimana.

April 1994 Habyarimana is killed when his plane is shot down. It sparks a genocide. In the space of just 100 days, more than 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus are killed by Hutu militias. The Tutsi-led RPF takes control.

2000 Paul Kagame becomes president.

2010 After a decade of increasing oppression of the opposition, Kagame wins re-election, but observers say the vote was neither free nor fair.

2017 Kagame is re-elected president with 98.8% of the vote.

friend in the US. "I'm not sure I'm going to make it." But in confinement, he achieved a kind of transcendence. "I had never enjoyed happiness and joy like the ones I found in prison," he wrote in the book, published posthumously.

Released in 2018 under presidential pardon, Kizito discovered his freedom came at a price. His passport had been confiscated and he was obliged to regularly report to authorities. When survivors' groups invited him to perform, the government would ensure the offers were cancelled. State media black-listed his songs. He was forced to move repeatedly, after intruders tried to force their way into his house at night. "He realised he was still in jail," says Lewis Mudge of Human Rights Watch (HRW), who was in regular contact. "He went from being someone who was part of the elite, to struggling financially. It was made clear to him that people wouldn't touch him with a barge pole." He began collecting information on Rwanda's disappearances and illegal detentions, using his prison contacts to become a de facto human rights researcher.

He was coming under pressure from Rwanda's inspector-general of police, Dan Munyuza, who wanted Kizito to spy on human rights and opposition activists who trusted

him. Munyuza, who previously ran Rwanda's dreaded Directorate of Military Information, has been repeatedly identified by dissidents as a key figure in various government plots to hunt down members of the Rwanda National Congress, an opposition group set up by high-profile former RPF insiders.

"The threats were very direct," recalls Mudge. "You need to start working with us" Munyuza was telling him. "The chef has shown you this generosity, now you need to show gratitude." The stress was intense. "He kept saying 'I need to get out.' But it was about making plans, being proactive. There was never a sense of desperation."

A final straw seems to have been a conversation in which Munyuza told the singer he'd deposited money in his bank account in return for services yet-to-be rendered. On 14 February 2020, Kizito and two collaborators headed south, intent on fleeing the country. Kizito's famous face appears to have been his undoing. He was recognised in villages he passed through, and police caught the three near the frontier with Burundi. A few days later Rwandan police announced Kizito had been found dead in his cell, having allegedly used bedsheets to hang himself. Within hours, a gruesome photo, impossible to authenticate, began circulating on social media. It shows someone who looks very much like Kizito lying in a pool of blood, bruises to his head and neck. The man's arms are tied firmly behind his back.

The Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative and HRW, along with British and US officials, called for an independent inquiry, but their requests have gone ignored. No inquest was ever staged. Yet those who spoke to Kizito after his rearrest insist he was full of plans for the future, and gave no hint of feeling suicidal. Every Rwandan in the diaspora I interviewed for this article rejects the notion he died by his own hand.

Why kill Kizito, a devout entertainer popular with Hutus and Tutsis? Friends and family – too terrified to be named – believe he died because his songs highlighted the hypocrisy of the post-genocide narrative the RPF promotes abroad. "He was trying to unite Hutu and Tutsi, while the government depends on divide and rule," says a friend based in the US. "He was preaching that we should forgive, make one nation, and they don't want that." Rather than protecting him, his celebrity may well have been a contributory cause. By targeting someone so high profile, the RPF signalled that no one is off limits.

Linking up via social media, youngsters in a diaspora across Africa, Europe, North America and Australasia have already started marking the anniversary with 10 days of vigils and masses. His photograph graces the Twitter accounts of many supporters – some of whom are calling for his canonisation. His defiance is inspiring Rwandans to break their usual

frightened silence, says Noel Twagiramungu of the Washington-based Africa Center for Strategic Progress. "Kizito has become an emblem, a reference point, a symbol." A former Rwandan prime minister is calling on the fractious opposition to unite in Kizito's name.

The anniversary comes at a politically sensitive time. For decades, Rwanda, Ethiopia and Uganda enjoyed the status of "donor darlings" in the west, their budgets boosted by aid from the US and UK in particular. Accusations of rigging in Uganda's recent elections, war in Ethiopia's northern Tigray, and a stream of revelations about Rwanda's thuggish treatment of its critics abroad – the topic of my book *Do Not Disturb* – are creating disquiet over western support. Now that the UK's Department for International Development has been brought into the Foreign Office fold and Covid is putting budgets under pressure, there is diminishing official appetite for Britain being seen as an unquestioning supporter of authoritarian rule in Africa.

Earlier this month Freedom House, a US pro-democracy group, published a chilling account of how Rwanda uses rendition, kidnappings and assassination to silence dissent abroad, physically targeting Rwandans in at least seven countries since 2014, including Germany, Kenya, Uganda, South Africa, the DRC and the UAE. "Rwanda is among the most prolific transnational repression actors worldwide," the thinktank stated, ranking it alongside China, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Russia and Turkey for the "extent and violence" of its campaign.

During the UN's periodic review of Rwanda's human rights record in Geneva last month, UK and US delegates surprised many by voicing deep concern at Kigali's record. Both key donors called on Rwanda to conduct credible investigations into allegations of extrajudicial killings, deaths in custody and enforced disappearances, and to bring perpetrators to justice. The Rwandan government rejected the statements as having "no basis in reality", but appeared taken by surprise by the sharpness of the criticism.

It will be interesting to see whether such concerns resurface in June in Kigali, where the Commonwealth Heads of Governments Meeting is due to be held. The choice of venue sparked angry protests, and delegates standing for Rwanda's national anthem in Kigali's state-of-the-art convention centre, will be grimly aware that the singer who would have once belted out its patriotic words lies buried in the capital's outskirts, a haunting illustration of all that is awry in modern Rwanda.

Do Not Disturb. The story of a political murder and an African regime gone bad, by Michela Wrong, will be published by Harper Collins and Hachette in March. michelawrong.com/books/