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Airborne Peace

By Meredith May

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Action What Works



Airborne Peace

In Rwanda, Radio La Benevolencija uses soap operas to heal ethnic tensions

BY MEREDITH MAY

ON WEDNESDAYS IN Rwanda, just before sundown, the radios come to life. Farmers lay down their tools to gather under shade trees, fan clubs take their usual seats in the bars, and a hush settles over prison courtyards.

Each week, an estimated 85 percent of radio listeners in Rwanda tune their radio dials to the soap opera *Musekeweya* (New Dawn). Using a Romeo and Juliet plot to symbolize Hutus and Tutsis, the program teaches listeners how to prevent ethnic violence, embrace reconciliation, and heal the wounds of the past.

In 1994, radio-borne hate propaganda helped prompt a Hutu-led genocide of 75 percent of the ethnic minority Tutsis. Within three months, the genocide wiped out 10 percent of the Rwandan population—some 750,000 victims. Now, *Musekeweya* is reclaiming the radio to help survivors live together again.

"*Musekeweya* helped me calm down," says Kennedy Munyangayo, a 36-year-old filmmaker from Kigali who lost his two brothers, several uncles, and a sister to the genocide. "I used to think that we should react by hating the people who did the genocide, but af-

Rwandans gather around for a radio program that has rewritten the script for Hutu-Tutsi relations.

ter a year of listening to the show, I realize that if someone did a bad thing, the answer is not to react by doing more bad things," he says. "For this country to go forward we need to be honest and free in our spirits and minds."

Created by the Dutch nonprofit Radio La Benevolencija, in conjunction with some of the foremost psychologists, traumatologists, and university researchers in the United States, *Musekeweya* was first broadcast in 2003 on the government-controlled Radio Rwanda. Local Rwandans write the stories, and a cast of 35 Rwandan actors read the parts in Kinyarwanda, the country's main language. Today, *Musekeweya* can also be heard on privately owned radio stations in Burundi and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Each week, soap coordinator Aimable Twahirwa receives up to 120 letters from fans. The show is so popular, he says, that parents are naming their children after the characters. And at a recent festival, more than 10,000 fans showed up to meet the actors. "The ac-

tors, they are like small gods here," he says.

Yet the listeners are not just worshipful followers. Instead, finds a recent study, they are more likely than non-listeners to stand up to authority and to voice their own opinions. This kind of civic leadership can stop the slide toward genocide, says psychologist Ervin Staub. "Genocide is a societal process," he notes. "It takes not only bad leaders, but also followers and those who stand by and do nothing."

THE SCIENCE OF CIVILITY

Musekeweya crackled onto the airwaves at a crucial moment in Rwandan history. In the late 1990s, 1.5 million of the country's 8 million people were accused of participating in the genocide. The legal system and prisons were not prepared for this influx of cases, so community leaders created some 10,000 village tribunals, or "gacacas." After judgment from a jury of their peers, convicted participants could reduce their punishments through communal labor.

Because the genocide was so vast, convicted war criminals were also the neighbors, coworkers, and in-laws of the innocent. "The accused would soon be free and returning to these villages, and it was very traumatizing to everyone who lived there," explains George Weiss, founder of Radio La Benevolencija.

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At that time, Staub, a psychology professor at the University of Massachusetts, and Laurie Pearlman, a traumatologist at the Headington Institute in Pasadena, Calif., had just finished a three-year reconciliation training program in Rwanda. Their seminars reflected Staub's theory of the origins of genocide: It begins with scapegoating, leading to destructive ideology, and then culminates in actual violence. He describes his research in his book *Roots of Evil*.

"Government and nonprofit leaders at our workshops wanted us to reach a wider audience," says Pearlman. "Because radio is the main means of communication in Rwanda and people listen together in large groups, we decided to develop a radio program."

At the same time, Weiss, an Austrian filmmaker of Jewish descent living in the Netherlands, had just finished reading Staub's book. It prompted him to start working on a television series to counteract hate speech and violence in Bosnia.

Weiss met Staub and Pearlman in 2001 to consult on his TV series. By the end of the conversation, they had convinced Weiss to come to Rwanda and create a similar program for the radio.

Weiss raised \$1 million from the Dutch and Belgian foreign ministries and the United Nations. He then created the nonprofit Radio La Benevolencija Humanitarian Tools Foundation and set to work on a script with Staub and Pearlman. "We come up with the story line, but the actual episodes are written by Rwandan writers who make it culturally credible," Staub says.

EVERYDAY HEROES

Musekeweya's plot centers around two villages: Muhumuro and Bumanzi. Muhumuro is less fertile and prosperous, and resents Bumanzi for receiving land with good soil from the government. Muhumuro residents also contend that the land is rightfully theirs.

These tensions between the villages mirror the situation that led to the 1994 genocide. Also mimicking real life, disputes over inheritance, intermarriage, and irrigation in the soap opera further inflame the grievances between the two villages, culminating in revenge attacks, village burnings, and, ultimately, killings. When a progressive youth group brings in wise elders, the animosities dissipate and the two villages come up with a crop-sharing plan. Writers keep the episodes rolling with political intrigues, love affairs, and new disputes.

A thread running throughout *Musekeweya* is that everyday fear and instability—arising from poverty, health problems, relationship woes, and other sources—can lead to people to think in terms of "us" and "them," and then to blame "them" for one's own problems while blindly banding together with "us." This thinking then escalates to intergroup hostilities and violence. Characters on the show who resist these tendencies by intervening in unjust activities, critically examining authority, and healing trauma become the show's heroes.

One such character is Batumuliza, played by Monica Uwingabiye, a 35-year-old high school teacher whose father was Hutu and mother was Tutsi. Like the rest of the cast, she reads her lines one Sunday a month at the studio. The job hasn't made her rich, but it has made her feel purposeful. "I like changing people's minds," she says.

BROADCAST TOLERANCE

Use media and genres that people already know and like

Create norms that support dissent and the questioning of authority

Empower individuals to take action for peace

"I lost my younger three sisters, brother, and my father. This is a history we have to figure out how to live with," she says.

NEW NORMS

Yet people's minds are not changing—at least not in the ways that psychologists usually expect, finds Elizabeth Paluck, an assistant professor of psychology at Princeton University. For her doctoral thesis at Yale University, she helped the original Radio La

Benevolencija design team evaluate the soap's impact after its first year. She divided 480 Rwandans into two groups, one that listened to the soap and a control group that tuned in to a health program.

Paluck found that although the *Musekeweya* listeners' personal beliefs and feelings had not changed, what they thought everyone else believed and felt had changed. In other words, their perceptions of the social norms were different. Specifically, they believed that marrying across ethnic lines, questioning authority, and expressing genocide-related psychological distress were more socially acceptable than did the control groups. Because social norms govern so much of human behavior, this finding is a sign that the soap opera is having its intended effect, says Staub.

Indeed, Paluck witnessed behavior change firsthand. As a gift for their efforts, participants received the radio and cassette tapes used in the study. People in the control groups unanimously decided to hand over the radio to the village elder to regulate its use and collect money for batteries. In contrast, the soap opera groups voted for a group-share plan or to have one of the study participants regulate the radio's use. "That tells me that something changed in that public space that made them comfortable saying something unpopular," says Paluck, who published her findings in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

Who keeps the radio may seem like a minor matter, but in Rwanda, it's a big indicator, says Staub. "An aim of our program is to moderate respect for authority, because over-strong respect for authority is one of the steps that led to the Rwandan genocide."

Rwandan culture is showing other signs of change, says Pearlman. "When we started our work in Rwanda, there were one psychologist and two psychiatrists for a country of 8 million people," she says. "One thing we encountered was people thought traumatized people were crazy. Now I see a lot more empathy."

Even outside of Rwanda's borders, *Musekeweya* is having an effect. Surrendering rebels at the Rwanda-Congo border cite the radio program as their No. 1 reason for giving up the fight, relates Weiss. More broadly, Roma groups in Europe have approached him about creating antidiscrimination radio soaps in their countries, and Weiss would also like to bring similar programs to Bosnia and Israel. Radio La Benevolencija is also contemplating a television series template that could be used in different contexts. That way, when the threat of violence looms, the team would be ready to go.

"The so-called international community sits back and never does anything when there are early signs of genocide," says Staub. "Yet they could do something before the violence happens, at much less cost in human lives and money." ■