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Filmmaker Aghion focuses lens on troubled Rwanda

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FILM CLIPS

The PBS series "Frontline" marked the 10th anniversary of the genocide in Rwanda last week with a harrowing two-hour historical overview called "Ghosts of Rwanda."

The film traced the explosion of hatred between the rival Tutsi and Hutu factions in April, 1994 that resulted in an estimated 500,000 deaths in one month's time.

The French-American documentary filmmaker Anne Aghion has been visiting Rwanda for the last several years examining the aftermath of this modern holocaust and looking into the terribly complicated quest for "justice."

Monday night, the Sundance Channel will be presenting the U.S. premiere of the two films Aghion has made so far — "Gacaca, Living Together Again in Rwanda?" and "In Rwanda we say... the family that does not speak dies."

Aghion works in a style somewhat reminiscent of the great American documentarian Frederick Wiseman; she keeps herself and her questions out of the films and allows us to draw our own conclusions about what we are seeing.

The two Rwanda documentaries show the complex attempt of the new government to come to terms with the almost incomprehensibly vast violence a decade ago.

About 100,000 suspected murderers were imprisoned by the government. Since it would take more than a century to process these suspects, the Rwandan government went back to a form of traditional citizen tribunals called Gacaca, designed both to bring justice to criminals and allow survivors to publicly air their own versions of what happened a decade ago.

As a result of the Gacaca, some suspected Hutu killers have moved back into villages with Tutsi and Aghion shows us the simmering outrage of people trying to cope with this



Contributed photo

Tough times: The problems in Rwanda are the subject of two film by Anne Aghion on the Sundance Channel Monday.

attempt at "closure."

Imagine suspected Nazi war criminals returning to neighborhoods filled with Jewish survivors of the Holocaust and you will have some notion of the challenges the people of Rwanda are facing in the years to come.

Again and again, Aghion shows us Rwandans who face the camera and ask, "What would you do?" and it's a haunting and seemingly unanswerable question.

In a recent phone interview, Aghion said the remarkable directness and seeming lack of emotion in her interview subjects is perhaps because Rwandans do not have our familiarity with TV news and its coverage of disasters.

"There's a lack of self-consciousness ... this probably has to do with the fact that these people rely on speaking to communicate ... there's no television to do that for them," she said.

Aghion said it took weeks of filming and meeting with these ordinary Rwandans to gain their confidence, but there was still a huge cultural gap between the film crew and the genocide survivors.

"These whites ask the strangest questions," one Rwandan villager says at one point after she's been prodded to open up about surviving the horror.

"Oh that is so true," Aghion said of the woman's comment. "If you had gone through this, what kind of a question would that be?"

Although she has not decided if she will return to Rwanda for a third film, Aghion does wonder what

Aghion shows Rwanda's ills

Continued from F1

will happen there during the next few years.

"I don't think the people are being forgiven," she said of the suspected murderers who have moved from prisons back to their former lives.

"There is no forgiveness but I think there is a degree of acceptance," Aghion added of the belief that somehow the victims and their former oppressors must try to move on for their own sakes and for the sake of their country.

Aghion hopes that the venting of past outrages during the village Gacaca process might release a lot of the hostility that was pushed down in the aftermath of 1994.

"If you don't address these issues ... it's going to build up ... the cover of the pressure cooker has to be opened or it will burst," she said.

Aghion strove to keep her own presence out of the two films "because I thought it was important that there be no official voice ... I wanted the people in the film to be the ones who talk."

The filmmaker's taste and restraint has resulted in two of the most remarkable documentaries you are likely to see this year.

"Gacaca, Living Together Again in Rwanda" will be shown Monday at 9 p.m. and "In Rwanda we say ... the family that does not speak dies" will be shown Monday at 10 p.m., both on the Sundance Channel.

The films also will have a theatrical run at New York City's Pioneer Theatre April 16-18.