

Sula Karuhimbi

Sula Karuhimbi lives in a place called Musamba in Rwanda. Sula is an old woman, of kind and generous nature, a poor farmer with a knowledge of natural medicine. She knows what plants to gather and prepare when someone is ill. She uses natural remedies to ease pains and discomfort.



As with many elderly people who live alone and know about nature, in different countries and in different centuries, some local people have called her a 'witch'. As a result, before 1994, very few people went near her unless they wanted to obtain some natural remedy.

When the killing began in Rwanda in 1994, it was a terrible, frightening time. The Rwandan Genocide was the slaughter of roughly 937,000 Rwandans of the Tutsi tribe and moderate members of the ruling Hutu tribe. Led by Hutu extremists known as *Interahamwe*, it took place during a period of 100 days in 1994.

Sula did not hesitate. She welcomed Tutsis to hide in her small home and in the shed where her animals were kept. For many weeks, she was able to hide more than 20 Tutsis and feed them from her meagre stock of home-grown vegetables.

Not surprisingly, it became difficult to keep so many people hidden in such a small place. The militia came and demanded that she hand over the people she was harbouring. At first, she tried to pretend that they were relatives wounded in the conflict. Sula also used her known reputation for natural remedies. 'One man came to me with wounds on his head,' Sula said later. 'I pounded herbs to treat him. Just then, the attackers came, demanding to know what I was doing with the people in the house. I said I was treating their skin ailments. They insisted on seeing them, so I brought out the one who had wounds on the head. I had smeared the rest with ash and dust so they looked sick.'

However, this subterfuge did not last long. When the militia came back, Sula tried something else. Knowing how superstitious the men were, she relied on her reputation as a witch. Taking a gourd and some bells, she rattled them and hit them, chanting all the time. When the soldiers asked what she was doing, she replied that she was calling on the spirits of those they had killed to come and kill them in return. She then warned the soldiers that, if they took one step inside her house, evil spirits

would swallow them up. Her ruse worked. The soldiers backed off and those in hiding were safe.

Wellace Ntaganira came to Sula's home on the first night that the violence began and he will never forget her courage. 'She is a heroine,' he said. 'What she did was very difficult and rare in those days. I think God worked through her. I am alive, but many others died.'

Sula herself does not believe she did anything very special. She cannot understand why everyone would not help a fellow human being in trouble as she did.