Cultural Daily

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"Sweet Dreams" Rwanda: Ice Cream, Drumming, and Genocide

Sophia Stein · Wednesday, November 27th, 2013

In *Sweet Dreams*, documentary film directors Lisa and Rob Fruchtman cleverly lead us into the darkest places to explore the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide of 1994; without dread or fear, we willingly follow them down that hole, because we are going in through drumming and ice cream and who does not love those things. It's simply a brilliant approach to story, that is as moving, as it is uplifting.

Ingoma Nshya, which means "New Kingdom," is the first ever Rwandan women's drumming troupe. By custom, drumming in Rwanda was performed for the King only by men. When the group's founder, Kiki Katese inquired if drumming had been forbidden to women for any good reason, she was told "maybe because the drum was too heavy." Her response in forming the group was defiant, "Okay, then let's see how strong we are!"

In 1994, close to a million Tutsis were killed by their Hutu neighbors, friends and in some cases family members. Playwright and director Katese, like a Phoenix risen from the ashes of her country's calamity, founded *Ingoma Nshaya* in 2005 as a safe space where Tutsi and Hutu women could unite. Katese becomes inspired to start an ice cream cooperative, "Inzozi Nziza," ("Sweet Dreams") with the women in her drumming troupe, and she partners with artisanal ice cream producers Jennie Dundas and Alexis Miesen of Blue Marble Ice Cream in New York to achieve that goal. The film tracks the journey of the women to accomplish their sweet dream.

Sister and brother filmmaking team, Lisa and Rob Fruchtman are each expert filmmakers in their own right. Lisa Fruchtman is an Academy-Award winning editor of *The Right Stuff*, her additional credits include, *Apocalypse Now, The Godfather: Part III*, and *Children of Lesser God.* Rob Fruchtman is a Sundance Film Festival award-winning director of *Sister Helen*, his additional credits include *Trust Me* and *Seeing Truth*. Their partnership is auspicious on this inspired first collaboration.

I had an opportunity to speak with Lisa Fruchtman, Producer/Director/Editor of "Sweet Dreams," in anticipation of the upcoming premieres in Los Angeles and San Francisco. We discussed *Ingoma Nshaya*, Rwandan genocide and mourning — and, of course, ice cream.

Kiki Katese (Playwright, Director "Ingoma Nshaya") and Jennie Dundas (Actor, Co-Founder, "Blue Marble Ice Cream"). Photo by Lisa Fruchtman, courtesy of "Sweet Dreams," the documentary.

Sophia Stein: The very first thing I notice when I look at the film is the joy, the sheer abandon with which these women drum. It's a tribute to the healing power of music. When was the first time you saw *Ingoma Nshaya* play?

Lisa Fruchtman: The first time I saw them play was when we arrived in Rwanda for our shoot.

We had no pre-production on this film. I was advising at the Sundance Institute film lab in June, 2009, and someone told me a story about what had happened in the theatre lab when Rwandan playwright, Kiki Katese, and ice cream entrepreneur/actor, Jennie Dundas, met. Kiki put the ideas together in her own head about ice cream, joy, respite, and the focus of her work in Rwanda, which is the rebuilding of the spirit, and she invited Jenny and Alexis (Jenny's business partner) to come to Rwanda to help her drum troupe start an ice cream shop. Together they formed a non-profit, and went off to research the idea. It was a year later when I heard the story and thought, "Wow! I'm so interested in that, personally." With my filmmaker's brain, "What a way in!" We instinctively want to turn away from the story of genocide in Rwanda, it's so horrific, but now there's another way into the story, something to shoot that might be really interesting or beautiful. I phoned my brother, Rob, who is a documentary film director, and I pitched the idea to him. He responded with cautious optimism; "Um-hmm … but Rwanda is very far away, how are we going to do it?" We didn't know, but we decided, "Let's go see," and we were on a plane for our first shoot within five months of that conversation. We hadn't met Kiki or seen the troupe perform, and on the plane we wondered to ourselves: "How are we going to get the drummers to play for us?" We were traveling to Rwanda with Alexis, who had completed their pre-production and was now ready to begin the ice cream store project. We knew that we would follow that process of creating the business, and that the business might be a success or a failure (we didn't know which), but we thought that it would be interesting. We arrived in Butare, the Rwandan town where *Ingoma Nshaya* is located, and low and behold, Kiki was hosting a festival on art, culture, and violence, and the drum troupe was preparing to perform. There were a hundred women on the grass rehearsing, and that was what we first started shooting. We were so lucky.

S²: Had you been to Rwanda, or Africa, for that matter, before?

LF: I'm a world traveler. I have done a lot of traveling, but never to Africa previously. Kigali, the capital of Rwanda, is quite a beautiful city. Butare is the second largest city, but it's what we might call a "town." It has one very long paved street — that's it, and some off-shoot dirt roads with houses and markets. Kiki lives in Butare. The National University of Rwanda is there, and that's where we were based. Most people live in villages in the hills that surround Butare. Like you see in the film, one girl walks an hour and a half down the slopes to rehearsals in town.

S²: What research did you do to prepare?

LF: We read Philip Gourevitch's fantastic book, *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed With Our Families* (1998). Philip Gourevitch is a staff writer for The New Yorker and former editor of The Paris Review. He wrote the book shortly after the genocide, which provides an in-depth immersion into the history, or "the accepted history." There are many narratives, depending on your politics. This highly regarded book was our jumping off point in understanding the political situation during the genocide in Rwanda.

S²: Kiki Katese is such a powerful and inspiring leader. "People are not like roads and buildings," she explains and asks, "How do we rebuild a human being?"

LF: Kiki is a visionary. There has been a tremendous amount of rebuilding of the country in Rwanda. The economy is going great guns; there are women in Parliament, and there is a lot that is really working in Rwanda. But emotionally, there is a lot of trauma as you would expect, and not a lot of ways of dealing with that. The mandate of the government is: "We are all Rwandans, we are going to give up those tribal designations." (Even though, of course, everybody knows, who is who.) "We are going to rebuild this country as Rwandans, and we are going to move forward." That's all very good, but it doesn't address the emotional realities that this all occurred within one generation. How are people really going to rebuild themselves? There are many people who acknowledge that the people who lived through the genocide and even their children may

never fully heal. By introducing moments of healing and by introducing new possibilities, maybe the next generation will be able to move forward. I think that what is brilliant about Kiki's ideas are — they are new. She brought Hutu and Tutsi women together, which was great enough. She could have invited them to form a dance troupe, which is what already had existed in Rwanda for women, but she didn't do that. She founded a drumming troupe, which had never previously existed for women in Rwanda. Kiki chose drumming, in part, because it is new. When you introduce one new idea, it creates the space for other new ideas. Ice cream is the same. Kiki could have started a basket weaving business or a jewelry making business, any kind of business that already exists for these women. There are collectives in Rwanda that are doing all of those things. But she chose something new, something that nobody had ever tried before.

S²: It is almost unimaginable for Westerners to think that Rwandans have never tried ice cream before!? One man you interview comments that he has seen people eating it in film …
LF: Isn't that delightful? [That Kiki had the foresight to introduce them ice cream into the culture?] It was delightful to us to see these women lined up to be part of a project when they actually didn't know what the product was. They had learned from their involvement with Kiki that something new could transform their lives, and they were willing to go on another journey, even though they weren't quite sure where it would lead.
Ingoma Nshaya in front of Inzozi Nziza (Sweet Dreams) Ice Cream Shop. Photo by Lisa Fruchtman, courtesy of "Sweet Dreams," the documentary.

S²: I take it you have tried the ice cream they craft at Inzozi Nziza (Sweet Dreams). How is it?
LF: It's very good. Blue Marble Ice Cream in New York city is absolutely fantastic; they know what they are doing. Because of the electricity issues in Rwanda, they decided to make soft-serve ice cream, which is different than the style made at Blue Marble in New York city. If the electricity goes out (which it does frequently), you may lose what you are in the process of making, but you will not lose stores and stores of inventory, which, of course, would break the bank. That said, it's artisanal ice cream — not in the precious way that we make it in this country. They have local honey, they have local milk, they use local flavors, and it's simply delicious.

S²: When the women are forming the cooperative, there is a scene in the film where they are considering the economic commitment that will be required of each member – $10 or $6 a month to participate, and this clearly seems out of reach, impossible maybe, for many of these women. I am curious, how was that tension resolved?
LF: It wasn't totally resolved. We have hours of footage about that — many meetings that went on for a long time, where they tossed out different ideas about sweat equity and selling produce. It's still a work in progress, to be honest. They have changed the dues structure many times over. The ice cream store collective is evolving as they go along. I think we will include information about that, at some point, in our community outreach modules. The drumming collective, as we indicate in the film, is free and open to everyone. A business is something different. I think Kiki's idea, besides the business realities which have to be addressed, is the commitment reality. She is kind-of a tough love person – i.e. we don't just get stuff just handed to us by businesses in New York, we have to step up to the plate.

S²: At some point, Kiki tells the women that President Kegame has heard about the ice cream project and he wants to introduce himself to them. We see him listening to his constituents in the village, one by one, as they communicate their various concerns and needs. When one woman asks him with such care and respect for a cow, without hesitation he grants her request — "Give her a cow!" "Keep developing yourselves," he advises his people. He seems like such a compassionate man. What were your impressions of him?

LF: As in many places, it's a very complex situation. It is a generous portrait, and that was our experience. But it was also our decision not to make a movie about Kegame and the politics of Rwanda.

S²: A sense of suspense builds about whether the shop will open in time. I love it when the women are praying together for their supervisors. It is priceless, that look on Jennie's face – because clearly this is not her method of problem solving.

LF: That is one scene in which they pray, but they pray a lot! It's a very religious country. In fact, one guidebook on Rwanda specifically advises that it's best not to express agnosticism in Rwanda because people are so very religious, and it is upsetting to them when somebody expresses a question about God. The Catholic church was absolutely complicit in the genocide, so there was a movement away from the Catholic church into Seventh-day Adventist and other movements. There is the whole story of Evangelical influence in Africa, but I'll leave it that they are very religious and pray often.

Ingoma Nshaya drummers. Photo by Lex Fletcher, courtesy of "Sweet Dreams," the documentary.

S²: To see the pride and joy of the women at being chosen to work in the ice cream shop — where here, working in an ice cream shop might not really be considered a desirable job — it puts into relief the Western sense of ambition and competition.

LF: You have to understand that these are women who have never had jobs or training in job skills. Only elementary school is mandatory in Rwanda. With the exception of a very few, most of the women have only been educated up through the fifth grade. Depending on what was happening politically at times, even that short window that they attended school may have been sporadic or disrupted. This ice cream project has provided the women with business skills. We show briefly a scene with the group called Business Council for Peace (Bpeace), that trains women in business skills in conflict-affected countries all around the world, including Rwanda, Afghanistan, El Salvador. There was a lot of training given to all the women, not only the women who got the jobs. They all learned how to open a savings account, about finance, customer service. They all had English classes, English being the new language in Rwanda. It was not previously taught in schools. The training classes provided the women with lots of new skills that they could take into their lives. As with people everywhere, some were more ambitious than others. Some of them have really run with it, and others have not.

S²: I often hear communicated by foreigners from less developed countries how they much they appreciate the "respect for the law" that they see as a hallmark of U.S. culture. From their perspective, "corruption" is much less an issue in business here, than in their countries of origin. In the training sessions you film, the trainer emphasizes, "we will all use the same system," "we will all count the same way." Later, one of the women is fired for her poor work attitude (arriving late to work) and for petty theft. I was curious about your take on the cultural differences and values particular to the Rwandan culture and how those values might impact the conduct of business in the ice cream shop in Butare?

LF: I think that this government in Rwanda now is promoting very positive values in the country. There is a Community Service Day, in which everybody participates, called "Umuganda." [Rwandans are required to work in their communities from 8:00 am until 11:00 am on the last Saturday of each month.] Rwanda is not a democracy, and there is a lot of oversight, shall we say. So it is a controlled environment. There is a lot of law and order. How that effects businesses in general, I cannot say. The training provided by Blue Marble and Bpeace did not emphasize law and order so much as how when you are building a collective, you have to consider the needs of the whole, and not merely yourself and your own individual needs — even if your family is

hungry, even if your grandma would like a taste of ice cream. The shop has to run as a business, and you have to put yourself together in the mindset of a businesswoman.

S²: The woman who was fired seems to not even really understand her trespass, to her it does not seem like a big deal to arrive late to work —

LF: Or to take something small, it could be some milk. In a way, it isn't a big deal, but it is a big deal.

S²: Another one of the women is able to build a house as a result her earnings from the cooperative and working at the shop. Did you have a sense of how much money the women were earning as shareholders in the cooperative and as employees of the shop?

LF: I cannot recall the exact figure, but I'll say it's quite a decent amount of money. They gave that a lot of thought. The ice cream shop had to succeed as a business, to work within financial parameters to allow for the potential for success. The ice cream couldn't be too expensive because people needed to be able to afford to buy it, but it couldn't be too cheap, or the women wouldn't earn enough to cover their expenses. The same types of considerations were made with regards to salaries for the workers — they were paid a pretty good salary because a portion of that salary went back into the cooperative. It was a complicated equation.

S²: During the month of April, you filmed during the National Month of Mourning, when the entire country remembers the 1994 genocide. When you shot the footage in 2011, the Rwandans were commemorating the horrific events that had occurred seventeen years earlier. Did you have a sense of what you were entering into? Were you prepared for what you saw?

LF: We actually learned about this during our first year of filming, but we made a decision not to return then. We didn't feel that we knew people well enough, and we had been told that it was an extremely traumatic time in the country. We waited a full year, and we thought we were prepared, but honestly, we were not prepared emotionally for the experience. It was so intense. Rwanda was like a different country. The level of depression in the country was just mind-blowing. We are actually the first people to film the commemoration ceremony in the stadium. There are a lot of good movies about the genocide and about Rwanda, but they all use archival footage. This month of mourning is has a lot of elements. The ceremony in the stadium is at the beginning, after which there is stuff happening everywhere — reburials, services, teach-ins, conversations in churches. There are memorials sights with skulls and bones dotting the countryside everywhere that people visit. There is a Holocaust type of museum in the capital. No music is allowed to be played. The whole tenor of the country changes dramatically. Peoples' emotional states, as you can see, change dramatically.

S²: I wondered, how you imagine that national hysteria that precipitated the genocide? Did you witness any evidence of lingering ethnic tensions while you were in Rwanda?

LF: There are two primary tribes in Rwanda: The Tutsis and Hutus. They have both been in Rwanda together since the 17th Century. There's a lot of intermarriage; they share the same language, the same culture, the same traditions, and the same religion. The bifurcation is similar to that of farmers and ranchers. Originally, the Hutus more worked the land, where the Tutsis owned cows. The power relationships have shifted many times throughout history, but the colonial influence of the Belgians exacerbated ethnic tensions in Rwanda. The Belgians introduced eugenics and a Rwandan version of what we know as the yellow star, identity cards, and assigning peoples these identities. There is a tremendous amount of intermarriage. We filmed Hutu and Tutsi women working together both in the drumming troupe and on this business endeavor, the ice cream shop. The conflicts we witnessed between the women did not seem motivated by ethnic

tensions. Rather, they were the conflicts that arise from scarcity and poverty that besets the people of a small town.

S²: Have the women seen the film?

LF: Only the women who have traveled with us have seen the film so far. Last year, *Ingoma Nshya* received the Common Ground Award in D.C., past recipients have included Archbishop Desmond Tutu, President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf of Liberia, Jimmy Carter, and many others. Five of the women traveled to D.C. to accept that award. During that trip, we were able to sponsor the women at our screenings in New York and in Amsterdam. Then they were invited to the Skoll World Forum on Social Entrepreneurship in Oxford, England, where they performed. Kiki was present, and we showed clips from the film. Now, the women have been invited to TEDWomen 2013, which is happening in San Francisco, December 4 and 5. Kiki will be giving a TED Talk — which is pretty damn phenomenal — and the women will be performing. We will be holding them over for our opening weekend of the film in San Francisco. Starting Friday night, December 6, they will be present throughout the weekend at select screenings in San Francisco, Berkeley, and San Rafael.

S²: Distribution in Rwanda – is that going to happen?

LF: There are no movie theatres in Rwanda, and I imagine the film will air on Rwandan television. We plan to return to Rwanda in February and screen the film then. We hope to show it to the President. We are looking for outreach support to fund touring Rwanda, and possibly Burundi, with the women and the film.

Lisa Fruchtman, Producer-Director-Editor, "Sweet Dreams." Photo by Jane Wattenberg.

Rob Fruchtman, Producer-Director-Editor-Cinematographer, "Sweet Dreams." Photo by Lisa Fruchtman, courtesy of "Sweet Dreams," the documentary.

S²: Lisa, you are a phenomenally accomplished editor of feature films. Was *Sweet Dreams* your first documentary film experience?

LF: *Sweet Dreams* is my first documentary feature. I have to say that I got my start in film as an apprentice with the first documentary film collective in the country – Kartemquin, which still exists. They have made such fabulous movies as *Hoop Dreams*, and many others. I never went to film school. During my first year in the industry, I trained in documentaries by working at the National Film Board of Canada. Then I moved to the Bay area, and through a weird sequence of events, I was hired as an editor on *The Godfather: Part III*, and I went into the feature world. I have had a wonderful, exciting, fabulous career, but in some part of my background and nature, I have always felt located in documentaries. So I wanted to make this film. *Sweet Dreams* is my first documentary, and it's my first directing project.

S²: Did you share the directing with your brother, Rob Fruchtman?

LF: We co-produced, we co-directed, we co-edited; we shared everything. We had a cinematographer with us for the first of four trips we made to Rwanda, but after that, Rob was the cameraman. We sat side by side. Our tiny crew — the two of us, essentially, and our Rwandan interpreter — proved to be perfect for this film. Particularly in the interviews, where the space we had was less than the space that you and I have sitting across from one another. We usually were knees knocking in a teeny-tiny dirt house. It was intimate.

S²: Was it a shorthand to collaborate with your brother? Or were there unique challenges?

LF: In retrospect, it was a little crazy to get on a plane never having worked together. It worked really well. I think what has been hardest about this film was not the creative aspect, but the funding aspect. That has been kind of daunting.

S²: Do you know anything about Kiki's latest project – *Book of Life – Letters from the Living*

***to the Dead*?**

LF: It's a wonderful project that once again relates to the idea of memory and remembrance, but in a non-traumatic way — not being lost in the grief. Kiki asked prisoners, perpetrators, as well as, widows, younger students, and survivors to write letters to the dead. Those letters were whatever the writer wanted to say, such as "Mom, I wish you could have seen me today, I graduated from High School, and I was wearing my beautiful red dress." [She tears up.] This always makes me weep, to be honest. Kiki is engaged in keeping the connection to those who are gone, but allowing those connections to help the living move into the future, instead of only being focused on the past. Those letters have taken years to transcribe into French. Some of them were performed in a reading at the U.N. in 2012. In April, 2014, for the twentieth commemoration of the genocide, Kiki plans to direct a project that involves these letters being performed along with songs that have been written to take the whole mourning process into a different place. Provided that we are able to raise the money, we are planning to document that event.

"Sweet Dreams" opens November 29 in Los Angeles and December 6 in San Francisco. Details here.

Top image: The drummers of "Ingoma Nshaya," led by Clementine. Photo by Lex Fletch, courtesy of "Sweet Dreams," the documentary.

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