

# LSU sociologist produces documentary on Kenyan election violence

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While Africa is certainly no stranger to violence, the response to the Kenyan presidential elections of 2007 came as a surprise. Political unrest evolved into outright and unmitigated violence, marring the relatively peaceful history of Kenya's educated and mainly urban population. During allegations of voter manipulation and election fraud, two of Kenya's largest tribes, the Kalenjin and the Kikuyu, found themselves divided by anger, fueled by another tribe's promises of power and control.

Wesley Shrum, LSU professor of sociology, had experience dealing with human tragedy after Hurricane Katrina devastated the city of New Orleans. As a member of Team Louisiana, a team of Louisiana scientists commissioned by the state government to gather and document data relevant to the failure of the levees, he is intimately familiar with the impact of disaster on a population. For the past five years, he has been documenting the effects of both the hurricane and its aftermath for the Louisiana State Museum.

Although he has conducted fieldwork in Africa for years to learn more about the cultural landscape there, he never imagined he would be making a movie about African politics. His interviews with Kenyan scientists conducted over the span of two decades took a radically different turn after the killings began – they were no longer studying culture in hypotheticals. Theory had become all too real, and he felt that as a social scientist, it was his duty to research and respond.

"In 2008, they could not talk about their research in a vacuum – the violence had just ended," said Shrum. "It was like Louisiana after Katrina. An event consumes all your thoughts and actions."

He had a difficult time dealing with the emotional burden of Katrina. But Kenya was different.

"The Louisiana hurricane was the worst thing I ever experienced or studied, until this," said Shrum. "In Kenya, the deaths were from people killing each other because of their ethnicity. Katrina was tragic, but this was sickening."

After compiling a number of interviews on video, Shrum decided that the emotional depth of this conflict could only be expressed accurately through ethnographic video. The result? "Brother Time," a full length documentary about the postelection violence.

"It's a difficult situation for most Americans to understand," said Shrum. "We don't have a culture of rigged elections; Kenya does. Even students do it for their elections – it's expected. So for this to break out into such an epidemic of violence was shocking. For me, there was no other option but to make a film."

The political environment in Kenya is always complicated, even during times of peace. The country is home to more than 40 individual tribes, which generally get along well, although there are undercurrents of animosity – but elections are always tense. The explosive reaction to the 2007 election was fueled by the Luos, who were contesting for the presidency against the Kikuyus. The Luos promised the Kalenjins they could regain land in the Rift Valley, their traditional home. Because of the perceived decades-long supremacy of the Kikuyus over other Kenyan tribes, the proposal gained traction. The two joined forces against the Kikuyus and the violence began in earnest. The fighting

lasted for months, with more than 1,200 killed and even more injured and displaced.

To Shrum, one of the intriguing aspects of the situation was the role that Kenyan universities and their students played in the revolt and ensuing violence.

"Often the youth, and especially university students, are the ones demonstrating in the streets," he said. "You can look at the 2008 [presidential elections](#) in the United States to see the impact young voters had on the outcome there."

In places like Kenya, a university student is often the only highly educated person from his or her village. There, the status of "student" brings with it immense respect, as it conjures images of serious study, commitment and intelligence. Shrum believes Kenyan university students and officials played a positive role in the cessation of the political upheaval, acting as catalysts of social change rather than pandering to the political urgings to take to the street.

However, as sociologically relevant as the situation was, it wasn't without inherent danger. But Shrum felt it was worth the risk. The National Science Foundation's Political Science Division agreed, providing the resources for Shrum to continue his study of scientists and educators in Kenya, this time focusing on their experiences during the election.

"We never ask for support for a movie, just as an LSU researcher does not usually get federal funds for writing a book or essay," explained Shrum. "You get resources for doing research, but the way you disseminate your work is up to you."

Using qualitative methods and video ethnographic techniques, Shrum studied the role of these institutions in the election and its aftermath.

"We began to shoot our interviews in lab and field, and we couldn't help seeing the broader story. It's a mythic tale, if not biblical. A man takes up bow and arrow against his neighbor – neighbors who have been friends, but from different ethnic groups," he said. "That was the origin of 'Brother Time.' The method of video ethnography allows us to create a dynamic document that will not only allow us to disseminate our findings to students and professionals, but to a broader audience, as well."

Shrum believes that incorporating new methods of data collection such as high quality video and audio into sociological research along with more traditional methods, such as surveys, interviews and observations, enables researchers to tell the sociological story in a more balanced and thorough way.

"It makes the whole thing more approachable," he said. "Now, you can show people in classrooms and lecture halls or even on the web, instead of relying solely on textbooks and lectures. It's much more engaging. I hate to agree with the old radical slogan, but sometimes I think anyone over 30 doesn't get it."

Although the film is suitable for all forms of outreach, Shrum is insistent that "Brother Time" isn't solely for educational purposes – it's also for the people who went through the madness.

"Most of our movies are just for presentations and classes, but not this time. We have that luxury as academics, to decide when something needs a wider audience," said Shrum. "This one is for the Kenyans. When people saw the rough cut, they said, 'you have to show this before the next election, to prevent it happening again.'"

The ethnographic video "Brother Time" seeks to visualize this murderous struggle on a human level by focusing on two main

characters, a Kikuyu from the Rift Valley and his Kalenjin neighbor, who had become near-mortal enemies during the electoral violence. Shrum follows a Kikuyu through the cycle of violence.

"The main character says 'As a Christian, we would say all men are brothers. But now ... it's not the brother time,'" said Shrum. "When he said that, standing there where a lot of the killing took place, I felt a chill going up my spine."

While Shrum knows the overall experience was worthwhile and the outcome could be positive, it wasn't an entirely positive experience.

"I couldn't say documenting the trajectory of violence was a 'good' research experience, but it was an invaluable human experience," he explained. "When I was editing the movie, it literally made me sick to my stomach. You have to share that with a broad audience."

Shrum just received a major grant from the National Science Foundation to continue his work on new communication technologies in developing areas. He hopes that his work on "Brother Time" eventually helps Kenyans understand that they can break the cycle of violence and resentment.

"I'm a cynic, but a hopeful one. You have to try your best. When we were filming in New Orleans during the Super Bowl, there was an African American man dressed in full Drew Brees regalia. He said to me, 'The politicians never brought people together, but the Saints did,'" said Shrum. "Maybe this is the same. Kenyan politicians have not done a great job, so let's try a movie with a positive message. Let's get back to brother time."

Provided by Louisiana State University

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