

Tribal conflict

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [November 3, 1999](#) issue

There is a story in the Book of Genesis, rarely examined by modern readers, that is so pertinent to today's headlines that it should be required reading for any journalist reporting on the tribal conflicts that are at the heart of modern warfare. I reexamined the story after watching *La Genese*, a film from Mali, directed by Cheick Oumar Sissoko.

*La Genese*, which was shown at the recent Denver International Film Festival, is not a traditional "beards and bathrobe" Bible movie, but a brutally frank retelling of portions of Genesis 23-37. Sissoko describes the family and tribal passions created by the conflict between two brothers, Jacob and Esau. Sissoko was inspired to make the film in a contemporary African village to address the continued outbreaks of ethnic and religious violence that cause so much suffering and death in some nations.

At the center of Sissoko's film are Isaac's two sons. Jacob, the younger of the two, once tricked his brother Esau into giving up his birthright. The film opens with a brooding, angry Jacob sitting in his hut, grieving over the loss of his son, Joseph. Joseph's brothers have sold him into slavery and then deceived their father into believing he was killed by wild animals. Their evidence? A bloody cloak that Jacob refuses to let anyone wash until his exasperated wife plops it into the washtub.

Such emotional moments are repeated throughout the film, revealing a Jacob who is angry at his lot in life and very aware of the history of his continual conflict with his brother Esau. The film shifts between Esau, who moves about the desert as a nomad deprived of his rightful place in the family, and the troubled Jacob, whose family still keeps its flocks and works its fields. Sissoko's story focuses not upon God's dealings with Jacob as his chosen one, but on Jacob's all too human actions. The story that I recommend to journalists who report on world events is the brutal tale of the revenge Jacob's sons take on the man who has "defiled" their sister Dinah.

After Shechem "takes" Jacob's daughter Dinah, his soul "is drawn" to her. In modern terms, he "falls in love" with the woman he has taken by brute force and under the

customs of his time. If Jacob's family had not demanded revenge against Shechem's family, Dinah and Shechem might have lived happily ever after. This, however, is not a story of patience and understanding, but a harsh tale of the inevitable results of intense tribal, religious and family traditions applied with no thought of the consequences to others.

Although Shechem has done a thing "not to be done," his father Hamor figures that reasonable men would find a way out of this situation. "The soul of my son Shechem longs for your daughter; I pray you, give her to him in marriage." Shechem joins in, pleading to an aggrieved Jacob: "Let me find favor in your eyes, and whatever you say to me I will give . . . only give me the maiden to be my wife."

Thus is launched one of history's all-time cruel deceits by the family of the man who has already tricked his brother out of his birthright. Jacob's sons come in from the field and interject themselves into the conversation, saying, "Our sister cannot marry one who is not one of us, but your people can become like us by the simple procedure of having all the men in your tribe submit themselves to circumcision." In Sissoko's film, the scene is played with humor rather than horror. Hamor's tribal members line up and submit themselves to adult circumcision. A practitioner swings a blade, each man utters a groan, and then hobbles away.

Three days go by, and as Genesis 34:25 puts it, the men are "sore," considerably weakened and in no condition to defend themselves against Dinah's brothers, who "took their swords and came upon the city unawares, and killed all the males," including Hamor and Shechem. The entire city is plundered and its women and children taken captive.

Jacob scolds his sons, concerned for what the assault does to his own future: "You have brought trouble on me by making me odious to the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites and the Perizzites; my numbers are few, and if they gather themselves against me and attack me, I shall be destroyed, both I and my household." Unrepentant, the brothers respond: "Should he treat our sister as a harlot?"

Fair play, justice and rationality have little to do with this story. And God is on Jacob's side, or is at least prepared to guide him out of trouble, sending him to Bethel to build an altar. After Jacob departs, "A terror from God fell upon the cities that were round about them, so that they did not pursue the sons of Jacob." With backing like that, Jacob is ready to receive God's blessing and a new name, Israel.

Such intense religious feelings and beliefs, coupled with the solidarity of family and tribe, defy all rationality and make no sense to the outsider. But this Genesis story has been repeated throughout history: tribes as nations and nations as tribes have slaughtered strangers and neighbors and justified their behavior in the name of a larger purpose. With such logic, Adolf Hitler fostered a Holocaust. With such fervor, Slobodan Milosevic persuaded the Serbs that violations of their sacred soil and religious traditions could be avenged only by the destruction of their neighbors.

Genesis 23-37, retold in Sissoko's film, is the story of how humankind behaves when it imposes its own dark side on God's plan for history. It's a story of behavior motivated by deeply held, though terribly distorted, religious beliefs.