

The Stories We Share

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“Who we are, who we are capable of becoming, depends very much on the stories we tell, the stories we listen to, and the stories we live. Stories not only shape our values, aims, and goals; they define the range of what is desirable and what is possible.” In *The Sacrifice of Africa*, Emmanuel Katongole argues that the stories we tell shape our perspective, our behavior, and the type of people we become. Katongole, a Ugandan Catholic priest of Rwandan origin (one parent was a Hutu, the other a Tutsi), believes that the problematic state of Africa is largely rooted in stories of Africa originally told by outsiders but then increasingly adopted by Africans themselves: “Nothing good comes from Africa.” “Africa is a dark continent.” “Africa’s tribes are always at war.” “Africans are backward and primitive.”

The stories of ambition, greed, and violence of some early European contacts with Africa, such as King Leopold in the Congo, are still shaping African society. Likewise, stories of the expendability of African lives have been adopted by postcolonial political systems that “have no qualms perpetuating the same wanton sacrificing of lives in pursuit of their political ambitions and greed.” Katongole mourns the futility of lives sacrificed for causes that are neither true nor trustworthy.

In order for Africa to change, new stories need to be shared, stories with expectations of commitment and sacrifice for a better Africa. “For a new future to take shape in Africa, the wanton sacrificing of African lives would have to be confronted – no, interrupted – by a different story and its accompanying practices in which the sacredness, the preciousness, the inviolability, and the dignity of African lives are foregrounded.”

One would expect Katongole to describe the sacrifice of Africa as those lives senselessly wasted. However, Katongole instead uses the word “sacrifice” in its original sense, meaning “making sacred.” New stories, writes Katongole, “make possible the practices and communities that in turn make possible a new sacrifice of Africa (in the sense of the Latin root of sacrifice, which is to ‘make sacred’) and is thus able to interrupt the wastage (sacrificing) of Africa assumed within the founding narratives and institutions of modern Africa.”

Katongole describes three compelling illustrations of Africans whose lives, characterized by commitment and sacrifice, tell new stories that can change the imagination of Africa. One of those stories comes from Burundi, one of the most beautiful countries in East Africa, but also the third poorest nation in the world. Colonialist policies left a legacy of discrimination and hatred between the powerful Tutsi minority and the marginalized Hutu majority. Mutual massacres between 1962 and 1993 resulted in about 250,000 deaths.

A Tutsi church secretary, Marguerite “Maggy” Barankitse had adopted seven children, four of whom were Hutu. At the beginning of Burundi’s civil war in 1993, many Hutus hid inside her church for protection. When Tutsis attacked, Maggy tried to intervene, but instead the Tutsis forced her to watch the massacre of 72 Hutus. Miraculously, Maggy’s children survived by

hiding deep inside the church. “As soon as I knew that my children had survived... I could think of only one thing: taking care of them; raising them beyond this hatred and the bitterness that I came to see in their eyes.”

From 1993, the civil war raged on for twelve years, resulting in about 600,000 orphans. Maggy opened her doors to children who lost their parents in the war. Beginning with twenty-five children, she soon was caring for over 10,000 children. Maggy helped former child soldiers and war orphans learn skills and earn money by forming businesses, including a tailor shop, mechanical school, and computer school. However, she was concerned not only with providing for the children but also with helping them overcome their hatred. Maggy believes that African values of community and solidarity have changed into hatred and revenge. “We are not afraid to kill one another. We have accepted hatred because of ethnicity... We need to uproot the sprout from which the hatred grew and festered... we need to create a system in which the hatred, however ferocious, no longer exists. We need to invent a way of living without hate.”

Maggy’s multitudes of children from both ethnic groups live in an atmosphere saturated by love. She encourages children across the ethnic divide to work together, play together, and laugh together. Maggy also encourages the children to forgive, saying she learns the power of forgiveness from her children. Nine-year-old Justine, entered Maggy’s care after a neighbor killed her parents and sister. This little girl wanted to reconcile with the man who killed her family. Maggy tried to dissuade her, but Justine responded, “I want to live. Because if I hate him, I can’t live.” Justine then approached her family’s killer, saying, “I want you to ask me for forgiveness. I am able to forgive you... Because you can’t give me back my father, my mom, my sister, I ask you to become my father.” The murderer asked for forgiveness, and together they rebuilt Justine’s house that he had burnt after killing her family.

Maggy believes that hatred will never have the last word. The incredible story of Justine’s forgiveness and of the community built among other children Maggy helped raise provide hope for Burundi, but are there stories of hope that interrupt a cycle of violence in Nigeria? Here is one from Plateau State. Adamu, a Muslim, moved his family into a new house in the Christian area of his village. Three weeks later, post-election violence hit his community. Christian youths attacked Adamu’s new home but his Christian neighbors confronted the crowd. Pointing at his own home, a Christian neighbor said, “See that my house? If you are going to burn this house, you must burn my house first.” Though his house was saved, Adamu feared for his family’s safety so they moved back into his brother’s house. The next day, Muslim youths attacked the brother’s Christian neighbor. Adamu brought the Christian family into his brother’s house for protection. Then Adamu told the youths that they would not burn down that Christian house. The youths relented and moved on.

One act of violence sparks a senseless cycle of violence that keeps expanding and wounding— unless a new story interrupts. There can also be a cycle of caring. A Christian protects a Muslim. Then that Muslim protects another Christian. That Christian may then help a Muslim in trouble. Lord willing, the cycle of caring will continue to expand and heal.

There are two types of stories that can be told in Nigeria. There are many stories of violence and suffering. There is a time and a place for sharing these stories so we can comfort those who

suffer and lament injustice. However, focusing only on stories of violence and suffering arouses fear and suspicion. In suffering, there are always stories of caring. Katongole believes that stories shape the people we become. Do we want to be people of violence, or do we want to be people of love? Let us share, let us live new stories that bring a fresh vision of hope for the future.