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Commentaries on Marie Béatrice Umutesi's *Surviving the Slaughter*

Introduction to ASR Focus

Aili Mari Tripp

Marie Béatrice Umutesi. *Surviving the Slaughter: The Ordeal of a Rwandan Refugee in Zaire.* Translated by Julia Emerson. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004 [2000]. Women in Africa and the Diaspora Series. 259 pp. Acronyms. Chronologies. $19.95. Paper.

Surviving the Slaughter: The Ordeal of a Rwandan Refugee in Zaire is a remarkable book by an extraordinary and brave woman, Marie Béatrice Umutesi. Originally published in French as *Fuir ou mourir au Zaire: Le vécu d'une réfugiée Rwandaise* (L'Harmattan, 2000), the book was translated into Dutch, Spanish, and Catalan. The book has now been published in English (translated by Julia Emerson) by the University of Wisconsin-Madison Press as part of its series, "Women in Africa and the Diaspora." Umutesi is one of a handful of Rwandans who have published book-length accounts of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda and its aftermath. She writes beautifully, clearly, and with poignancy about the impact of the genocide on ordinary people as they experienced the unfolding of events. What follows this introduction are five commentaries on the book from a variety of perspectives.

The world was shaken by the swiftness and magnitude of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda directed primarily against the Tutsi minority and in which close to a million people perished. Little has been written or said of the mass killings that targeted the 1.5 million Hutu refugees who fled to

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eastern Congo-Kinshasa (then called Zaire). At least three hundred thousand people perished in these massacres as well as from exhaustion, hunger, and illness. The author, Marie Béatrice Umutesi, is a university-trained woman who was working with women's associations in Byumba, Rwanda. In 1993 Umutesi was forced to flee with tens of thousands of people from Byumba to Kigali as a result of incursions of the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) into Rwanda. Then in 1994 after the genocide, as the RPF took over Kigali, she fled to Congo/Zaire with members of her family and several others in the massive exodus of hundreds of thousands of refugees. They moved from one refugee camp to another while being pursued by the RPF soldiers. She and other refugees walked, sometimes ran, 2,000 kilometers from Bukavu to Mbandaka through the rain forests of Zaire. They were hunted down, not only by the RPF but also by other marauding armies, and refugees died by the thousands in gruesome attacks by Rwandese forces and from hunger, disease, and exhaustion. They were largely ignored by the international community and betrayed by humanitarian associations, especially the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR). Umutesi eventually made it out of Congo and today lives in exile. By writing this book she has made herself a potential target of those in positions of power who wish to silence her.

As Jan Vansina, the renowned historian of central Africa (and professor emeritus of UW-Madison) eloquently put it in a review of the book (2000):

> She tells in unadorned, honest, and straightforward language what happened to her and to her companions: what they saw, what they felt, what rumors they heard during their flights or in the camps, their fears, their hopes, their disappointments, their illnesses, deaths, and the horror of it all. This account testifies above all to what humanity itself consists of in its greatness, depravity, and resilience. There are no enemy groups in this book; members of all of them were equally stricken.

Vansina calls this a "towering work," some of whose pages "achieve a greatness surpassing that of any ordinary memoir or testimony." He compares parts to *War and Peace* and predicts that the book will become a classic: "For Umutesi's book is also a literary monument. Her story is an epic for our times, a tale to ponder for the lessons it conveys, testimony so powerful and moving that it reaches an unintended literary greatness" (2000:134).

Surviving the Slaughter is a gripping tale of death and survival in central Africa, but it is much more than that. As the essays that follow show, the book addresses many key contemporary debates and questions having to do with genocide, the nature of humanitarian aid, the rights of refugees, women refugees, and ethnic conflict. Umutesi helps us understand what underlies the fears that have fueled a history of violence between Tutsi and Hutu in Rwanda and in the region.

The commentaries include the perspectives of a Rwandan human rights

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activist (Aloysius Habimana), two political scientists of central Africa (René Lemarchand and Catharine Newbury, who also wrote the preface to the book), a historian of the region who visited some of the Bukavu refugee camps in 1995 (Danielle de Lame), and a Congolese scholar of African literature (Aliko Songolo), who examines Umutesi's writing as testimony and memoir.

First and foremost, the book shows the complexity of the genocide in Rwanda and of the makeup of the refugees who fled. They included killers but were mostly innocent women, children, and the elderly, yet they were widely portrayed by the media, the Rwandan government, and others as though they were all *génocidaires* who deserved no mercy. Aloysius Habimana, the director of LIPRODHOR (Ligue pour la Promotion des Droits de l'Homme au Rwanda [League for the Promotion of Human Rights in Rwanda]), the leading human rights organization in Rwanda, argues in his commentary that by targeting civilians in Congo under the pretext of being in hot pursuit of *génocidaires* (and with the apparent approval of the international community), the RPF-controlled Rwandan government rendered meaningless the notion of "presumption of innocence," which is accorded by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights even to those who have been charged with crimes of genocide. Moreover, the indiscriminate attacks against the refugees served only to reinforce the culture of violence that has prevailed in Rwanda.

Were Rwanda's incursions into Congo intended as preemptive attacks? René Lemarchand finds evidence in Umutesi's account that the nature of RPF attacks—their brutality and their aim of annihilating the refugees—suggests that the RPF was interested in much more than warding off a threat. Lemarchand, Songolo, and Newbury contemplate whether the mass killings of Hutu in Zaire should be considered genocide and why there has been reluctance to apply the term in this context. The commentaries also discuss Umutesi's book in light of the question: Why were the Hutu refugees so reluctant to return to Rwanda?

The essays explore the reasons that the 1996–97 war in Zaire received so little attention in the international media. But more important, they show how humanitarian agencies, the international community, and the media oversimplified events in the region. As the *New York Times* correspondent Howard French argues in *A Continent for the Taking* (2004), they all failed to see events outside of simplistic good guy/bad guy dichotomies. French, who was one of the few journalists covering the events Umutesi describes in Congo, aptly sums up some of the reasons for this oversimplification of a very complex conflict:

> As we turned the war into a black-and-white affair, with Mobutu and his Hutu allies playing the irredeemable bad guys, our most important failure was in suspending disbelief over the flimsy cover story of an uprising in the east by an obscure ethnic group. From the start to finish this war had been nothing less than a Tutsi invasion from Rwanda. The most powerful factor at work behind our self-deception was an entirely natural sympathy for the

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> Tutsi following the horrors of the Rwandan genocide. From that simple starting point, emotionally overpowering but deeply flawed analogies with Israel and with European Jewry and the Holocaust began to drive Washington's policies in Central Africa.... We in the press were far too slow in seizing upon the recklessness of Rwanda's invasion, and by the time the true dimensions of the tragedy it had unleashed could be discerned, almost no one cared. (142–43)

Umutesi's book tells us why we should care. Umutesi tells her story so that those politicians and military personnel responsible for these crimes against humanity can be held accountable.

Marie Béatrice Umutesi gives her own account of how she experienced refugee life in Zaire. She points out that all strata of Rwandan society found themselves in the camps, and one could find people from the army, prisoners who had escaped, *génocidaires*, and ordinary peasants all mixed together. She offers a rare glimpse into the challenges women faced and the massive scale of rapes that occurred. Danielle de Lame's essay, however, points out that the refugees had varied access to resources and wildly divergent motives and capabilities. They also experienced the camps differently.

The commentaries, especially Habimana's article, complicate questions relating to the human rights of refugees and the ways in which humanitarian agencies treat refugees. De Lame's essay alerts us to the extraordinary challenges the humanitarian agencies faced in providing for the Rwandan refugees. At the same time, Umutesi writes of the unwitting complicity of the international humanitarian organizations in the violence against the refugees. One learns, for example, of the policies of the UNHCR, which violated the U.N.'s own guidelines prohibiting forced repatriation when it placed a ten-dollar bounty on the refugees in order to encourage Congolese villagers to hand them over for this purpose. But even under more benign circumstances, refugees were often treated as victims to be pitied and objects of charity rather than, as Barbara Harrell Bond (2002) has described them, "survivors of adversity who often demonstrate[d] unimaginable strength and dignity in the most adverse circumstance."

As these essays suggest, Umutesi's book is a must read for scholars of ethnicity, genocide, human rights, humanitarian aid, women's studies, and the politics of the Great Lakes region. The questions it raises are at the heart of contemporary debates on these topics. Her first-hand account and her unique insights place this book in a category of its own.

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