
Anabaptist Mennonite Teachings

The Light That Leads toward a Life of Conflict
Transformation through Peacebuilding in
the African Great Lakes Region

by Safari Dieudonné Kizungu



Democratic Republic of the Congo, South Kivu Province, Town of Bukavu

Against impossible odds, a young boy escaped Rwandan genocide to live a life dedicated to active nonviolence and ethnic neutrality in the African Great Lakes region.

At eleven years of age, Safari Dieudonné Kizungu fled one thousand kilometers through the jungle, existing like a wild animal for more than two years. Despite continuing threats, he transformed his life and that of many others, becoming a clinical and social psychologist and Christian therapist, environmentalist, researcher, and human rights activist in Central and East Africa in the Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo.

I was born on October 21, 1983, in the city of Bukavu in the Kadutu commune, quartier Nyamugo BCB, in the South Kivu province of Zaire, now known as the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). I come from a family *overflowing with mixed ethnicities*:

- My father is from the Bahavu ethnic group, some of whom live in the territories of Kabare and Kalehe, and many of whom live on the island of Ijwi in Lake Kivu—one of the African Great Lakes—which lies on the border between Rwanda and the DRC (South Kivu province). The Bahavu are considered to belong to the Bashi ethnic group, which is a mixture of Tutsi, Hutu from Rwanda, and Bashi from the Bushi kingdom of the South Kivu province in the Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo. The Bashis' livelihood is primarily fishing, livestock, and traditional farming.
- My father's mother was a mixture of Rwandan Tutsis and Hutus, and my father's father came from the Bahavu.
- My mother was of mixed Rwandan lineage, from the Hutu and Tutsi ethnic groups of southwestern Rwanda.

Because of this complex mix of ethnicity that I inherited, I was marginalized everywhere I lived and suffered greatly from an ongoing identity crisis: in Rwanda, I was considered Zairean; in Burundi I was considered both Rwandan and Congolese; and now in the DRC many consider me Rwandan.

My father also fell victim to marginalization. Since both he and my mother were of mixed ethnic heritage, my father was automatically labeled as non-Zairean under the Mobutu Kingdom. After President Joseph-Désiré Mobutu, each successive ruler—Laurent Desire Kabila (1997), Joseph Kabila (2001), and Felix Tshisekedi (2018)—continued to pursue my family members. This marginalization led my father to encourage me to respond to ethnic conflicts with violence.

Rwandan immigration to the area of the Eastern DRC has taken place for centuries. During the twentieth century, a complex series of conflicts broke out between Hutus and Tutsis. In 1959, extremist Hutus sought to exterminate Tutsis in Rwanda in an effort to gather all Rwandan power into their own hands; Tutsis became victims of massacre and pillage of their cows and their land, forcing those who could do so to leave the country and seek refuge in the Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo, Burundi, Tanzania, and Uganda. In 1973, General Major Juvenal Habyarimana took power in Rwanda. As president, he began colluding with Zairean President Mobutu, integrating spying into Zairean institutions and demonizing and diffusing negative ideology against Tutsis. This spying resulted in the mistreatment of not only Rwandan Tutsi refugees but also Zairean citizens of Rwandan origin, including my family.

After the sovereign conference of 1991 to chart Congo's political future, all Zairian speakers of Kinyarwanda—an official language of Rwanda—were automatically considered foreigners on Zairean territory. Everywhere, Zaireans of Rwandan origin came under every kind of persecution.

That same year, my father called me and said,

My son, I want to give you an educational legacy as your guide in life. As you know, we are hated by our neighbors and the local authorities; they have accused us of being the sworn enemy of the Bantu peoples and of Zaire. I want to leave you a memorable legacy. My son, behold your dear brothers and sisters. War will be coming here to Zaire and Rwanda, and even to Burundi. I say this because of my own observations as well as the news that I am hearing day and night from the German radio spreading throughout Eastern Zaire. As a sign of power and victory, take this spear given from my father and his father; you will use it as a symbol of victory against our enemies. Learn to use this weapon to defend your brothers and sisters, without forgetting to defend our prominent ethnic group where they are around the world.”

When my father shared these words with me, I was only eight years old—far too young to understand what he was saying.

That same year, my father died. The following year, in 1992, my mother died. Both were victims of poisoning. We suspect our neighbors killed them. They hated our family because of our mixed ethnicity; they considered anyone with ethnic ties to neighboring countries to be highly suspicious.

After the death of our parents, my siblings and I were forced to go live with my grandmother in Rwanda. Upon our arrival in the country, we encountered ethnic hatred exceeding that which we had left in Eastern Zaire. Despite the deep hatred in Zaire, it was rare to see men there kill each other like we were seeing in Rwanda in 1993.

At that time, Rwanda was involved in an intense multiparty scuffle, and people were killing each other because of political differences as well as ethnic conflict. The country was under pressure primarily from Tutsi rebels led by Major General Paul Kagame against the regime of dictator (Hutu) President Major General Juvenal Habyarimana. Our mother’s family suffered daily because of attacks day and night by the Tutsi Kagame rebels. At the same time, Interahamwe, an extremist Hutu militia group founded by the Habyarimana political party, was attacking my family, accusing them of collaborating with the Kagame rebellion. My sister’s husband and my aunt fell victim to ethnic conspirators from the Hutu extremist Habyarimana party. Killings continued in my mother’s family until April 1994.

In 1994, tragedy struck Rwanda as the country suffered under a multitude of monstrous crimes leading to Hutu massacres and Tutsi genocide. Neighbor killed neighbor, husbands killed their wives, and wives killed their husbands. Parents even killed their children if the child’s physiognomy looked like the opposite ethnic group of their father or mother.

Truly, Rwanda was under demoniac influence; the most heinous thing I witnessed was extremist Hutus killing babies just for laughs! One day a Hutu Interahamwe killed my aunt’s child right in front of me. I can never forget the

image of the Interahamwe carving the child's heart out of his little body, then cutting it into small bites to eat and pronouncing that he had eaten the heart of a Tutsi to escape pursuit by the spirits of Tutsis! The experience left me severely traumatized.

I myself escaped being a victim of death as God protected me five different times from killers in the Rwandan Tutsi genocide. My knowledge of the Swahili language from Zaire was a crucial part of keeping me alive because I could understand what the Interahamwe neighborhood was saying; this knowledge preserved me from death when other members of my mother's family were being killed day and night.

During the tragic Tutsi killings, I was forced to wear girls' clothes in order to escape from the Interahamwe, who were murdering primarily boys and men. I had no choice but to flee from Rwanda back to Zaire before the Kagame rebels took Kigali. At eleven years old, I walked one hundred kilometers by foot to the Rwandan and South Kivu border of the DRC. Along the way, the Interahamwe militia grabbed me and pushed a spear into my right foot. During this period of intense suffering and crime in Rwanda, human corpses littered the landscape. The bodies, eaten by dogs and crows and then left to rot, filled the air with the stench of rotting flesh.

Despite the long, harrowing journey, I was finally able to break through the border. Exhausted, I stepped into Zaire. There, I was welcomed by agents of Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), including MCC Congo representative Cathy Hodder and her family. Terry Sawatsky and Cathy, MCC Zaire (DRC) representatives from Canada, led me directly to an orphanage belonging to what was then the Communauté des Eglises Baptistes (CBK) au Kivu under bishop Bubaka. It is now a community church called Communauté des Eglises Baptiste au Centre d'Afrique (CEBCA). In 1994, MCC was supporting the orphanage at the same time that they were supporting Hutu Christian refugee camps in Shabarabe and other refugee camps from 1994 to 1996. Before July 1994, there had only been Tutsi children who had survived Rwandan Tutsi genocide.

The MCC Canada and MCC U.S. representatives began their welcome by talking about tolerance and love toward our enemies. The process of reconciliation they described felt like a personal insult to me, given my experience as a victim of clashing political parties and politics based on regional and ethnic strategies from the extremist government in power at that time. In particular, I could not fathom forgiving one who had killed one of my relatives and eaten his flesh! The very thought of such forgiveness felt satanic to me.

But the MCC representatives never tired of talking to us about tolerance, forgiveness, and nonviolence. After I had been in the orphanage for some months, they began bringing Hutu orphans to join the Tutsi children in finding refuge on Zairean soil. The Hutu orphans were children whose parents had been killed by Tutsi soldiers during the liberation war led by the Rwanda

Defence Force. Children trying to live together with such clashing ethnic understandings gave rise to great distrust between the different groups. We sorely needed the MCC workers' charge to us to live in harmony.

In the orphanage, I hated my dear orphaned Hutu brothers and sisters because of what the Hutus had just done to the Tutsis in Rwanda. Given the ethnic tensions between us, it was difficult to live together, to eat at the same table. An MCC representative from Canada who observed the tension and conflict between us began a practice with us of prayer and playing/singing songs of love, tolerance, and forgiveness. But first, four times each day, they distributed candy to us with instructions to put each piece into the mouth of a fellow orphan to renew relationships by building love and tolerance between us. After four months of this, I began walking the road that would lead me to surpass hatred and live a life of tolerance.

In 1995, the MCC Canada staff ended their mission at the orphanage and were replaced by a couple named Fidèle Lumeya from Kinshasa and Krista Rigalo from the United States. Upon their arrival in South Kivu, they took care of us as the previous Mennonite staff had. By that time, several Tutsi orphans had returned to Rwanda, leaving only a few Tutsi children and the rest Hutu. The new staff reinforced the teachings of peace, tolerance, and nonviolence accompanied by prayer.

In addition to their humanitarian mission, the new couple decided to carry the spirit of their mission even further by planting the first Mennonite church in Eastern Zaire. They took the first step by forming a church choir with us orphans. In the new church, Fidèle and Krista continued to form our lives by teaching us about tolerance, nonviolence, peace, and peaceful conflict transformation.

A few months later, Zaire was attacked by a coalition of Tutsi armies from Burundi, Rwanda, Uganda, and Eastern Zaire under political pressure from Major General Paul Kagame and the military led by Mzee Laurent-Désiré Kabila. The coalition military group targeted our orphanage. Group members included some Rwandan military members who had attacked Zaire, and also some Tutsi youth who had lived in our orphanage and knew that young Hutu orphans lived there. Twenty orphan children were killed by our old Tutsi refugee comrade orphans. Many more orphans were kidnapped along the way as they fled to the equatorial forest. Many Hutu refugees lost their lives in the forest, killed by military coalitions or sickness.

Forced into hiding, I went to Bukavu, my birthplace, where I was greeted by more atrocities of war. On the way to my family's house, I passed the bodies of ten of my family members. They had been killed by Interahamwe Hutu refugees who accused them of being spies of Rwandan Tutsis on Zairean territory.

Traumatized by the carnage, I fled to my uncle's house. As I arrived there, at the edge of his house I spotted five Tutsi Rwandan military members who had

just killed my uncle. Then I saw them rape his wife and daughters before killing all of them too. I was cursed to witness all these actions done by the military members as I hid in a traditional outdoor toilet.

I didn't know where to go, but fear told me to flee! I was forced to travel more than one thousand kilometers from Bukavu to Kisangani under cover of the rainforest, with Zairean refugees from South Kivu and North Kivu, Hutu Rwandans, and Burundian Hutu refugees.

At that time, the Rwandan militaries and their coalitions of friends were hunting down Rwandan Hutu refugees anywhere they could find them, ripping their bodies apart with bombs and killing them with other cruel methods. Internal refugees from different Zairian ethnic groups who had gone to seek refuge in the west of the country were also being killed. Adults and children alike were murdered indiscriminately in the Zairean forest. During this period of extreme human tragedy, people were dying in droves like insects, destroyed by bombs or ravaged by diseases such as diarrhea, dysentery, malaria, and intestinal disorders. Famine and malnutrition took the lives of the rest. Hutu corpses were scattered in the equatorial forest, like the Tutsi victims of the 1994 genocide who had been killed by Hutu extremists (Interahamwe) and Major General Juvenal Habyarimana's army.

I lived like an animal in the forest, alone without any family members. I survived by eating crabs pulled from the rivers and the raw meat of mice, monkeys, and snakes. I even ate uncooked trees and tree roots! The thick vegetation of the forest canopy threw shadows everywhere that choked out the light, and the rain fell on me mercilessly day and night. It was an inhuman life.

I couldn't find safety in any shelters—whether for Rwandan Hutu refugees, Burundian Hutu refugees, or the Tutsi Rwandan military—because each group believed I was spying against them. So I lived as a refugee in the equatorial forest in the DRC for two years and six months. God protected me from being killed there on more than twenty-three occasions.

Finally, the miraculous hand of God led me out of the forest, back to the city of Bukavu, where I was welcomed by the Mennonite church and MCC. By God's grace, our brothers and sisters of the church under Pastor Beghela Philemo and Pastor Mbuyi Charles Kabinda from L'Eglise Mennonite du Grand Lac and Mennonite Central Committee accompanied me through trauma counseling and provided crucial support in other ways. Their efforts set me on the difficult road to finding normality as a human being.

In Bukavu, I had to remain in the church because the town was controlled by Tutsi Banyamulenge from the Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (Minembwe), Tutsi Rwandan militaries, and Tutsi Burundian militaries. When these groups were in town, their mission was to arrest and kill anyone they suspected to have any mixed ethnic heritage or relationship with Rwandan Hutus or Burundian Hutus. My multiethnic background—Rwandan Hutu, Rwan-

dan Tutsi, and Havu from the DRC—made me a vulnerable target, so I rarely ventured beyond the church building.

It was now the year 2000, and I had already been the victim of Maï-Maï rebels (the local Congolese military rebels) and Hutu Rwandan rebel groups, who wanted to kill me because someone involved in ethnic conflict was accusing me of taking a neutral position in Congolese conflicts caused by Tutsis from Rwanda, Burundi, and Uganda in the DRC. They also accused me of helping Tutsis establish the Hima Empire in the African Great Lakes region. These situations led one of our oldest neighbors to call the rebels to come kill me.

By 2001, I remained in danger of losing my life and had no choice but to return to Rwanda. I entered the country under the auspices of Rwanda-Burundi-MCC, aided by personal assistance from an MCC volunteer in Rwanda. This volunteer helped me enroll in school and supported my studies for six years in Rwanda until I received my secondary school degree in the human sciences.

Taking me under her wing and treating me as her own child, the MCC volunteer helped me fit in despite cultural differences related to the history of Rwanda, Congo, and the region in general. She covered tuition and room and board, and gave the best parental advice to help me receive a sustainable education for nonviolence, tolerance, peace, and peaceful conflict transformation within our communities.

These Anabaptist Mennonite teachings led me to the idea of establishing peace clubs and working at healing trauma in secondary schools in Northern Rwanda, where I encouraged my colleagues to take up a culture of tolerance, nonviolence, forgiveness, and peaceful resolution of conflict. During our dialogues about these issues, some of my friends were traumatized by bringing their tragic experiences from Rwanda, Burundi, and the DRC out of the shadows. Talking out loud about such painful topics of conflict and tolerance was frowned upon, but I felt that leading these conversations was the best way to help the greatest number of people—especially young colleagues my age who desperately needed to break out of the criminal behavior stemming from ethnic conflict and marginalization in Rwandan society. Horrendous criminal acts against Rwandans in Rwanda and Zaire had deeply traumatized them. The pain of these brothers and sisters drove me to introduce a psychotherapeutic assistance group for them. With God's strength, many of them have changed their lives around.

After receiving my high school certificate in human sciences, I attended university at Institut d'Enseignement Supérieur de Ruhengeri in Musanze, Rwanda, where I studied governance for years, again through the support of the MCC volunteer. While there, however, I discovered the failure of African administrators and leaders to provide ethical and responsible leadership to help people in suffering situations. Disenchanted with that field of study, I abandoned it for one that I felt could offer more hope.

In 2008, I enrolled in Hope Africa University in Burundi. The MCC volunteer continued supporting my studies for an additional two years. After those two years, I received additional support that enabled me to complete my bachelor's degree in clinical and social psychology.

In Burundi, I once again became a victim of marginalization. Burundi, Rwanda, and the DRC were colonized by Belgium, and the people of these countries were suffering from ethnic conflict, marginalization, massacres, genocide, sexual violence, and more. At the university, some Tutsi Rwandan, Burundian, and Congolese Banyamulenge colleagues formed a coalition to separate themselves from the Hutus. Likewise, Hutus from Rwanda and Burundi as well as from North Kivu formed a coalition against the Tutsi coalitions of those countries.

Having positioned myself as a supporter and facilitator of peace, nonviolence, pacifism, and reconciliation, I felt obliged to take a neutral stance between these two ethnic groups when conflicts erupted around the campus. One way I practiced this was by moving toward the academic communities on campus that were not involved in ethnic conflict and hatred, such as students from Uganda, Kenya, Haiti, Cameroon, Tanzania, and non-Banyamulenge Congolese Tutsis.

My nonviolent behavior was foreign to the students; it was the opposite of how they handled their differences. Because of this, the Tutsi and Hutu groups both accused me of being a traitor: the Tutsis claimed I was a member of a rebel military group spying on them, and the Hutu group claimed I was part of the Kagame government spying in Burundi. This prompted one of the college students to ask the chancellor of the university to expel me from the school. Some of the Hutu Rwandans were militia group members of the FNL (Forces nationales de libération)—the Burundian extremist opposition party—and some extremist Hutu young Imbonerakure were from the CNDD-FDD (the Conseil national pour la défense de la démocratie-Forces de défense et de la démocratie) party.

It is only by the grace of God that I am still alive. Both groups attempted to demonize me in the eyes of non-Burundian and non-Rwandan colleagues in an attempt to isolate me on campus. The situation so traumatized me that I almost lost my faith and my neutral position in the midst of the conflicts. At my lowest points, I wanted to take the path of radicalization against my perpetrators, who were interfering with my studies and my life.

Overwhelmed by the situation, I finally turned to the embassies of both the DRC and Rwanda to seek protection. At the Rwandan embassy, the ambassador expressed fear for my life, believing I was in grave danger of being kidnapped and killed as other Tutsi Rwandan students had been by Interahamwe and Imbonerakure ideologists. I learned that ten Tutsi Rwandan students from others campuses had been killed during that same period by their known Hutu colleagues. The ambassador advised me to either leave the campus and return

to Rwanda or move far off campus and live in another district (commune) of Bujumbura.

Out of respect for the Rwandan ambassador, I decided to heed his advice and move about fifteen kilometers away from the university in Ngagara commune to a new home in Kanyosha commune. Daily I awoke at 5:00 a.m. to arrive at the university at 7:15 a.m. Then, after going all day without food or drink, I left the university at 5:30 p.m. to return home by foot. The effects of going without eating or drinking severely weakened my body, and I fell ill with tuberculosis for six months.

In the midst of my illness, I struggled greatly with my new beliefs in peace and nonresistance. *Why should I suffer because of Mennonite beliefs and teachings?* I asked myself. Finding no ready answer, I decided to take the position of revenge like other criminals.

But when I made this decision against my enemies, my heart could not find peace. I felt compelled to seek counsel with a mentor and ask for advice to overcome the stressful situations in my life. This mentor reminded me about the love of Jesus Christ for sinners. He told me that Jesus had come to save the world because He is love and His love makes the forgiveness of our sins possible. If you want to overcome all the problems that fill your life, he said, as a Christian think and live forgiveness. He also reminded me that Jesus Christ came into the world as light but the world instead regarded him as a shadow.

My mentor encouraged me to continue taking a neutral position in conflicts because in doing so I could be a light for all peoples who live by conflict—a light that would transform others into peacemakers. I accepted her counsel and recommitted to taking a position of neutrality in conflict situations.

Since then, little by little, people have been coming to ask me to forgive them for what they were planning to do against my position of neutrality in their conflicts. Some of them, after finishing their bachelor's degrees, were called to work for the Burundian government, others returned to Rwanda, and still others returned to the DRC. Now I can't go two weeks without being called by colleagues who formerly viewed me as an enemy but are now asking for my support to help them resolve conflicts in their jobs, their communities, and their families.

After completing my bachelor's degree in clinical and social psychology at Hope Africa University, I began studying in the DRC for my master's degree in environmental science. In 2014 and 2015, I researched plant and animal biodiversity in the park of Kahuzi Biega, within the territories of Kalehe and Kabare and in the forest of Itombwe, within the territory of Fizi in the province of South Kivu, which had been affected by the proliferation of internal and foreign rebel groups.

During this time, I became connected to Amani Yoke Grand Lac, a local human rights and peacemaker organization, and I began teaching young Hutus

from Rwanda and Mai-Mai about the importance of leaving the forest and stopping sexual violence against their Congolese mothers and sisters. I taught them to be advocates of peacemaking and to live with a spirit of tolerance and respect for human rights, especially the rights of Congolese women, who, in the DRC are considered a weapon of war. They are victims of sexual violence by Congolese rebels as well as outside rebel groups from neighboring countries who proliferated in the DRC.

I also taught the young people to bring a halt to other vagrancy issues and acts of killing. During this time, I was able to help seventy Congolese and Rwandan rebel youth transform their lives and leave the forest and the way of violence. Another seventeen Rwandan Hutu youth between the ages of twenty and twenty-five agreed to return and rebuild their country with other Rwandans. I helped them to be in contact with the UN peacekeepers' mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) before they transferred to Rwanda.

In 2016 and 2017, using the same process under the Amani Yoke Grand Lac program, fifty-three young Congolese rebels from different Mai-Mai groups and ethnic groups agreed to put their weapons down and leave the forest and violence to build a better Congo without war and violence!

Today, as a human rights activist and peacemaker in the DRC, I know that my life continues to be at risk as I encounter the dangers of dictatorship, anarchy, extrajudicial killings, and other human rights and natural resource abuses by the government and rebel groups. Yet I continue with my aspirations from Anabaptist Mennonite doctrine because the teachings on peace, tolerance, nonviolence, and peaceful transformation of conflict are helping me succeed in my mission among different forests, towns, and villages of the Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo.



After our marriage, my wife—Cyuzuzo Twagirayezu Alice—and I were assigned to live as an Anabaptist Mennonite family modeling the way of peace in each community or ethnic group of the African Great Lakes region. Basing our lives on Mennonite Anabaptist doctrine, we established a marriage founded on peace, nonviolence, and conflict transformation teachings. Our desire is to transform our countries that are suffering with multiple conflicts, killings, violence, environmental degradation, and extreme poverty.

Anabaptist Mennonite doctrine inspired me to establish the Amani Yoke Grand Lac and Christian Research Center in Africa (CRCA) as a research and a local human rights organization focusing on “accelerated peacebuilding and eco-engagement” in the African Great Lakes region. We are developing our ideas around the teachings of peace, tolerance, nonviolence, trauma healing, and environmental revitalization while doing field research on nonviolence; climate change; conflict resolution based on natural resources, environmental degradation, and sustainability development; and other such issues in Africa.