

MSENWA OLIVER MWENEAKE, Hope in the Midst of one Refugee's Experience: a Congolese Perspective

This piece provides a unique insight into an individual's personal experience of living in the Democratic Republic of Congo. It comments on the political context of the author's experience as well growing up as a child in the DR Congo, his life as a refugee and then his experience of eventually moving to Canada.

Introduction

The Democratic Republic of Congo ("DR Congo"), located in central Africa, was a Belgian colony and the personal property of King Leopold II before independence in 1960. Since 1996, Congolese have been systematically oppressed by local political forces and international companies who have usurped power, enriched themselves with the country's natural resources at the expense of local citizens, and forced many into exile as refugees. Nonetheless, the Congolese people have demonstrated great resilience as they continue to work for peace and self-sustenance through education.

Background to 1996 War in Democratic Republic of Congo

"Our country has all the skills, talent and natural resources to flourish," my grandparents would emphasize, "but we have been afflicted by more than one hundred years of war. Our beloved DR Congo has suffered more atrocities than any other country on earth. Since colonial times, people have particularly abused us here in the Fizi district of eastern Congo. This has kept us in a state of chaos for many, many years."

DR Congo was previously known as the Belgian Congo in colonial times and later, Zaire. It was a Belgian colony and the personal property of King Leopold II for many years before its independence in 1960. It sits in the centre of Africa, surrounded by news-grabbing countries such as Uganda, Rwanda, Sudan, and the Central African Republic. It is arguably best known as the setting of Joseph Conrad's book, "Heart of Darkness" and unspeakable, unfathomable terror. During King Leopold II's reign, many Congolese were slaughtered and enslaved as he exploited the country's rich natural resources. The Democratic Republic of Congo War, often referred to as the African World War, has claimed more than six million lives, over 3 million people have been displaced within DR Congo and over 2 million forced to become refugees in neighbouring countries (World Without Genocide 2013).

Childhood and 1996 War

As a child, I was ignorant of the political, social and economic factors that were beckoning war closer and closer to our district. I could not imagine my generation experiencing the same suffering as my elders and ancestors. Yet the terror that would uproot me from everything familiar was just on the horizon.

I was born in DR Congo, the second largest country on the continent of Africa. My home was Lusenda, a small eastern village with a population of 6,000, situated in Fizi, South Kivu province, on the shores of the stunning Lake Tanganyika. As a child I knew nothing of what happened outside of my village, Lusenda. I was blissfully ignorant of the world beyond, happily nurtured by my communal village-family. Lake Tanganyika provided endless adventures for a child, balanced with the responsibility of helping family obtain provisions.

In early 1996, it became clear that violence was coming our way. We heard about the Banyarwanda (Rwandan Tutsis who had fled to the eastern Congo in the early 1950s to

escape ethnic fighting) joining forces with other Tutsis in Rwanda and elsewhere to invade DR Congo and steal its resources. As the days passed, our village received more news of the escalating conflict and merciless killings. I was so confused and wondered why adults could not resolve differences peacefully.

On October 25, 1996, our high school studies were abruptly halted by the sound of gunshots. The school authorities did not think it was anything serious until it was too late. Before we knew it, the person sent out to scrutinize the situation had been shot to death. Fear gripped us. Many of us started to cry. The situation became fatally violent within a short period of time, and more than five people were soon killed close to the school. Everything happened so quickly. It felt like the sky was falling down on us.

My sisters and I were traumatized in the face of death, wading through blood and corpses and hearing screams of terror. We made the 60-kilometre trek by foot to Lusenda only to discover my parents and siblings were not there. It would be seven long months before I was reunited with my family and forced to become a refugee in Nyarugusu refugee camp in Kigoma, Tanzania.

Life as a Refugee

As a child, I had never imagined I would one day trade my Congolese identity for a refugee card. The day I received my refugee card left an indelible mark on my life, signalling the beginning of utter hopelessness. To me, the word “refugee” implied homeless, powerless, lost and forgotten.

"In the refugee camp, each person is given a ration card to receive food and other basic supplies," my mother explained. I did not understand what she meant by ration cards because I thought people in the camp could farm the land and produce their own crops. I became angry at the UNHCR agency and its mismanaged system as many times we were forced to wait twice the amount of time for crucial supplies: we were told that trucks of food, blankets and tents had been stolen; later, we would learn that some UNHCR officials had sold them to Tanzanian businesses. There was also no comprehensible protocol for people to channel their complaints. I started wondering if the UNHCR worked for refugees or if a select few had created the agency to benefit themselves at our expense.

As it was not within the UNHCR's "mandate" to provide high school education, the refugees took it upon themselves to provide this education. Within weeks, we were sitting on makeshift benches and diligently studying under trees. We fervently believed that education was the key to a hopeful future. As I faced overwhelming obstacles to complete my undergraduate and Master's degrees, an opportunity arose to immigrate to Canada.

Resettlement to Canada and Life Afterwards

Even after immigrating to Canada in 2011, I continue to re-live the negative effects of the word *refugee* whenever I cross borders or apply for visas with my travel document. I also remain overwhelmingly disturbed over current news about DR Congo with its unending reports of mass murder, systemic rape and ongoing atrocities of war. My beautiful country has been labelled the “rape capital of the world” as women are systematically targeted and attacked on an unprecedented scale. The murder of innocent Congolese is overlooked daily as their land, rich in natural resources like gold, copper, diamonds and coltan (a mineral used in cell phones) is exploited. As demand for coltan has increased drastically over the years with

DR Congo producing 70% of the world's supply, many militia groups use this to finance the war, producing thousands more refugees.

The population of Nyarugusu refugee camp (where my family still lives) has now tripled to 250,000 and numbers continue to increase daily. Established in 1996, Nyarugusu refugee camp is one of the world's oldest camps. The UNHCR has made drastic cuts to all basic rations in recent years and the camp's medical, educational and sanitation structures are collapsing.

My experiences have led me to the conclusion that "fairness" and "justice" are words that the elite disregard to maintain their power and enrich themselves. Many times during the war and in Nyarugusu camp, I faced near-death experiences and battled against hopelessness. Still, I decided that my destiny would not be determined by life circumstances. I resolved to confront difficult challenges with perseverance and faith, believing that things would get better. I clung to the hope that education would one day position me to empower others. I am now fulfilling that dream through The Msenwa Foundation.

Msenwa Oliver Mweneake is a Canadian citizen of Congolese origin who holds a Master's degree in Leadership from Pan Africa Christian University in Kenya, and a Master of Social Work from University of Waterloo in Canada. He has practiced social work in Africa and is now a clinical social worker in Toronto area, Canada. He is interested in how policies affect macro social work practice, migration and diversity. Msenwa recently published his memoir entitled "Still With Us: Msenwa's Untold Story of War, Resilience and Hope" with proceeds going to sponsor widows and youth in DR Congo and beyond. You can reach Msenwa by email at stillwithusmemoir@gmail.com.

Bibliography

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