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Matthews. Father Wenceslas Munyeshyaka: In the Eyes of the
Survivors of Sainte Famille**

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Book Review

African Rights, with photographs by Jenny Matthews. *Father Wenceslas Munyeshyaka: In the Eyes of the Survivors of Sainte Famille*. London: African Rights, 1999. Pp. 96, paper. \$10.00 US

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The headline of the 21 July 2007 edition of the *New Times* (billed as “Rwanda’s First Daily”) reads, “Genocidaires Munyeshyaka, Bucyibaruta Are Finally Arrested.” In the article itself, journalist James Munyaneza reports the following:

Munyeshyaka, who was until his arrest an active priest, was last November sentenced by Rwanda’s Military Tribunal to life imprisonment in absentia for his role in the slaughter of over 200 people at St[e]. Famille Parish, St. Paul Pastoral Centre and CELA [Centre for the Teaching of African Languages] in Kigali during the 1994 Genocide.

Rwanda has for the last decade been calling on France to apprehend Genocide suspects on her territory, so did the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) last month.

... The two men [Munyeshyaka and Laurent Bucyibaruta] have been arrested a month after the ICTR prosecution transferred their cases to Paris, implying that they will most likely be prosecuted in France. However, what remains unclear is whether Paris will extradite Munyeshyaka to Rwanda to serve his life sentence since he is already a convict.

According to an ICTR charge sheet, Munyeshyaka, 49, is charged with genocide and three crimes against humanity (rape, extermination and murder). (2)

When *Father Wenceslas Munyeshyaka: In the Eyes of the Survivors of Sainte Famille* was published in 1999, Munyeshyaka was still on the run from justice. Although Munyeshyaka had been arrested in France, following the filing of a petition by a lawyer on the behalf of the Rwandese community in France (which included relatives of various victims of the genocide and the survivors of the massacres at the Parish of Sainte Famille) in June 1995, he was—following the hiring of top-flight Parisian lawyers by the French Catholic Church to defend their priest, much legal wrangling, and a series of convoluted and highly illogical legal decisions—set free. This was a man who not only “let the *interahamwe* roam around the church freely, drawing up their death-lists, but exposed us to danger by calling [the Tutsis] *Inyenzi* in front of them [the *Interahamwe*]” (71). His release constituted a gross mismanagement of the legal system and a horrible insult to those seeking justice on behalf of those Tutsis who were murdered because of his actions and his failures to act (e.g., his silence in the face of the murderous activities of the *Interahamwe* and other Hutu extremists) during the 1994 Rwandan Genocide.

This ninety-six-page book begins with a succinct but valuable discussion of the background leading up to the massacres perpetrated at the Parish of Sainte Famille in Kigali; the massacres themselves; the role of Father Munyeshyaka during the period of the massacres; the political influence of the Catholic Church in Rwanda;

a summary of the charges against Munyeshyaka as they stood in 1999; the legal proceedings against him through 1999; and the ongoing debate in France over his innocence or guilt, as well as “a plea for action” by Africa Rights, calling on the Catholic Church to make “an effort to establish the validity of claims against the [Rwandan] clergy” and to bring those cases to justice that merit it (10).

The rest of the book (11–96) features more than forty first-person accounts by survivors of the Sainte Famille massacres. In addition to harrowing accounts of the murder of innocents, these first-person statements provide a host of information about those who sought shelter at the parish; the vastly different ways in which Hutu and Tutsi were treated by the different parish fathers; Munyeshyaka’s relationships with the Hutu extremists, the Tutsis, and the general Hutu population; the views Munyeshyaka espoused during his sermons, in which he denigrated the Tutsis, accused them of culpability for the ongoing civil conflict, and stated that they should suffer accordingly; his selection of those who would be allowed to seek the protection of the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) and those who, in his eyes, “deserved” to be killed by the Interahamwe; and his rape of young girls (and the “gifts” and “penalties” he presented or meted out to those who “accepted” or “rejected” his predatory sexual advances).

One survivor/witness after another—including many who had known Munyeshyaka for years, attended his church, and even considered him a friend—comment on how his personality changed at the beginning of the genocide, how he had taken on a new persona. A classic example is his change in dress: he replaced his cassock with a bulletproof vest and wore a pistol on his person even while celebrating mass. There were even times when he carried grenades and a rifle.

Munyeshyaka’s deliberate inaction in the face of certain murder of Tutsis speaks volumes about his role as a collaborator with the Interahamwe, the Rwandan Armed Forces (FAR), and other extremists. Indeed, his lack of care for the plight of the Tutsis who had sought sanctuary at Sainte Famille is overt proof of the hate in his heart—a far cry, obviously, from the compassion usually associated (perhaps naively) with a man of the cloth. In decrying Munyeshyaka’s lack of care, a survivor observes that

Munyeshyaka refused us water and provisions, which caused the death of several people—the sick, elderly and children. We often went for several days without eating or drinking anything, though there were supplies in the Ste. Famille store. (39)

Discussing the evacuation of Tutsis to a safe area controlled by the RPF, another survivor notes that

On several occasions when UNAMIR came to evacuate refugees, [Munyeshyaka] was [deliberately] nowhere to be seen. He was absent. [Y]et, he was the only one who could give UNAMIR the order to start evacuating people to the FAR or RPF sections. (91)

But Munyeshyaka’s behavior was not limited to inaction. For example, as one survivor notes,

Munyeshyaka put guards at the entrance to Ste. Famille. They demanded a high price before they let in Tutsi who were running away from the *interahamwe*. Those who could not find money were refused entry. Their death was then certain because the *interahamwe* nearby were on the look-out. (64)

Munyeshyaka also took an active role in targeting those he believed should be murdered. Indeed, his selection of those who were to live and those who were to die is a

grim reminder of the actions of Dr. Josef Mengele at the Auschwitz death camp. One survivor of Sainte Famille tells the following tale:

As I was responsible for the refugees at Ste. Famille, I told Munyeshyaka that we should begin by evacuating the young men, who were most sought after by the *interahamwe*.

He [Munyeshyaka] spat at me and said, "You are really stupid. Don't you know that these are our future enemies who are going to swell the ranks of the RPF? They must all be killed." (12)

...Instead of following the alphabetical lists [requested by the United Nations Assistance Mission in Rwanda and which contained the names of those who wished to be relocated to an RPF stronghold], he passed these on to the *interahamwe*. Munyeshyaka did not want the men to be evacuated. (13)

Another survivor/witness notes that

The *interahamwe* were watching out for those who had the forbidden wish to go to Kabuga [in the RPF-controlled zone]. Munyeshyaka had given them the list. Many of these were killed before being evacuated. (16)

Another survivor reports that

During the first evacuation, Munyeshyaka described the Tutsi refugees as *Inyenzi* ["cockroaches"—the derogatory term for the Tutsi used by extremist Hutus], in the presence of militia who surrounded us. Afterwards, he asked us: "Who knows how to write?" I held up my hand, Munyeshyaka stared at me with a terrible look in his eyes and said, "Write down only the names of the members of your family and yourself." I immediately scribbled down the names of the remaining members of my family, not forgetting to write down my own. I even went beyond the instructions I was given and put other people on the list, like my friends who were waiting to be evacuated by UNAMIR. Munyeshyaka had also chosen Hyacinthe Rwanga to do the same thing.

That night the RPF rescued the refugees from St. Paul [a pastoral centre in Kigali]. The next day, 17 June, we were astonished to hear the militia who had come to take reprisals, asking for the people who had written the lists the day before: Hyacinthe and myself. They were violent and we scattered ourselves throughout the enclosure. They shot many young women and two women, Hyacinthe and "Teteri." (17–18)

And according to yet another survivor,

During the evacuation, the priest [Munyeshyaka] turned against those who wanted to go to the RPF Zone. [Not only did he] give the assassins a copy of the list of names before the evacuation took place, he limited the number of people to be evacuated, although there was no lack of space. He refused to let me go to the RPF area, by repeatedly erasing my name from the evacuation list. (38)

As for Munyeshyaka's relationship with the killers, a survivor/witness asserts the following:

Munyeshyaka held meetings with killers like préfet Tharcisee Renzako, councilor Odette Nyirabagenzi, and inspector Angeline in his small office. I saw all of this because I was a member of the committee [in charge of internal security] within Ste. Famille. The military men were from Rugenge... After these meetings, the killers would send their militiamen to abduct Tutsis to murder. (56)

One survivor after another comments on Munyeshyaka's use and abuse of the most beautiful girls who had sought refuge in Sainte Famille: the priest, they state, had his security men search out the prettiest girls, lodged them directly next door to

his own room, and “visited” them nightly; he provided these girls and women with extra food and took care of them and their families by providing sanctuary for them at the Hotel Mille Collines. Some also recount how he saw to it that one woman, Hyacinthe Rwanga, who rejected his advances, was shot and murdered by the Hutu militia:

He [Munyeshyaka] liked girls a lot. One day Hyacinthe [a Tutsi teenager] went into his room to beg him to hide her, but he began to kiss and caress her. Hyacinthe refused and came back crying. When I asked her why she was crying, she told me that Munyeshyaka wanted to rape her. (75)

Some of Munyeshyaka’s actions were a throwback to the Nazis’ charade at Theresienstadt. During the winter of 1943, the Danish Red Cross submitted a request to the Nazis to allow it to inspect the camp. The Nazis agreed to the visit, but insisted that it be done at a later time. In the ensuing months, the Nazis forced Jewish prisoners to create a façade for the camp, transforming their filthy and depressing prison into a sparkling clean and pretty place by painting walls, planting flowers, and “disposing of excess bodies” by shipping them off to death camps. Prior to the visit by the Red Cross officials, the Nazis instructed the prisoners, on the threat of death, what to say and how to say it. In the end, the ruse worked, and the Red Cross walked away satisfied that all was well within the camp. Similarly, a survivor of the Rwandan Genocide asserts that

one day, journalists [from RTLM], including a Belgian who worked for RTLM, Georges Ruggiu, were accompanied by military officers. . . . That day Munyeshyaka had chosen four refugees, three Tutsi boys and myself. He had taken us aside and told us: “You are going to be interviewed by journalists from RTLM who want to talk with the accomplices of the Inyenzi-Inkotanyi. I expect you to say that you are well, that you are eating, that you wash yourselves, and that your enemy is the RPF. You must also add that you are counting on the victory of the FAR to save you.” So that was how we spoke to these journalists telling them all the things which Munyeshyaka dictated to us. I remember that I gave a false name to these journalists during the introductions. (41)

The facts and stories related in this book, along with the reality that it has taken well over a decade for the international community to hold Munyeshyaka responsible for his murderous actions (or, so it appears at the time of writing—and, in fact, the latter is contingent on whether the French either honor the Rwandan government’s request for Munyeshyaka’s extradition or decide to move forward with their own trial in France *and* avoid allowing some slick law firm and the Catholic Church to turn justice on its head), raise a host of questions—questions about the seriousness of the international community’s commitment to ending impunity for *génocidaires*, about the justness of the judicial systems of certain nations (in this case, France), and about why the Catholic Church has such a tortuously difficult time coming to grips with the fact that genocide is an abomination and that, if its brethren and leaders are culpable for its perpetration, then they deserve to face both the justice system and their maker but certainly do not deserve to be protected from prosecution by the Church itself. Each question-*cum*-issue is ripe, of course, for additional research, but, even more significantly, it is high time for each to be addressed in the most concrete terms possible in order to ameliorate the problems they pose for our world in its ongoing struggle with what it means to be civilized.

Throughout the book, many survivors/witnesses compare and contrast Munyeshyaka’s wicked behavior with that of certain other priests who helped the Tutsis—most notably Father Célestin Hakizimana, who showed great courage,

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love, and care in his efforts to help the refugees who were in such dire straits. His own insights and his condemnation of Munyeshyaka's demonic demeanor and actions close the book. He concludes his highly informative statement with the following words: "I hope that Fr. Munyeshyaka will be brought to justice" (96). All one can really say in response is, *Amen*.