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Interrupting Our Journeys: Lamenting Political and Religious Corruption in the African Great Lakes Region[1]

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Bloodshed in Africa
Bloodshed in Africa
What a shame, what a shame
It's a bloody shame oh yeah!

I can't stand it
No I won't bear it
See Babylon you bound to fall
You bound to fall

Upheaval, upheaval
Worshiping Evil
Worshiping Evil
Worshiping Evil

—Alpha Blondy

The situation of violence and bloodshed in Africa, especially in the Great Lakes region, needs very little description. Almost everything happening now in this region today is connected to the flow of human blood that fills African streets, for-

[1]This essay was first presented as a talk at the 2017 Great Lakes Initiative Leadership Institute in Kampala, Uganda (January 10, 2017).

There are times when the biblical texts, once safely contained in a book, reach out and grab us, refusing to let us go, until we recognize that they are speaking to our time and our situation. Here the book of Judges speaks to all, showing the present human condition in the context of African genocide, for which we are all responsible.

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ests, rivers and lakes. Even the small moments of joy and hope that we observe in some areas are easily overwhelmed by the cries of dying children, the shame of raped women and men, the sighing of maimed survivors of violence, the plundering of already scarce resources by a few, the abductions of innocent civilians and internal slavery, summary executions of innocent people and of political adversaries, the disruption of families and communities, and the unravelling of social and religious institutions. The African Great Lakes region is bleeding, and what Alpha Blondy, the legendary musician from Cote d'Ivoire, says about the shame of bloodshed in Africa is particularly true of the Great Lakes region.

The story of a real person whom I met somewhere last year in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo illustrates the ubiquity of violence and its consequences on African soils:

> *We had a lot of problems during the war. We were taken to the forest by the rebels. One friend with whom I was abducted was pregnant. The soldiers wanted to see how a child sits inside a woman's womb. They ripped open her belly, and they killed the child she was bearing; they killed her too. They beat us and forced us to sleep with many men. They raped us. They wanted to hang us on a cross like Jesus. We were obliged to remain without clothes all the time* [note the humiliation]. *One woman could sleep with ten men in one day. I think hell is in that forest. There are all the kinds of sufferings there. They killed our husbands. It was in 2008. They took one woman, then they cut her breasts, they burned them in fire. When they are tired of you, they kill you and come to get other women.*[2]

Stories like this one are common in many of our countries, and they shock hearts that can still feel the pain of seeing evil and violence. The violence that has been destroying the Burundi, with a president who believes he is the only person capable of being president of the country, the cries of mutilated women arising from the mountains of the Congolese Kivus, the moaning of survivors of brotherly violence in South Sudan, the transformation of Kenya from a country of "*Akuna matata*" ("Nothing to worry about," in Kiswahili) into a land of terror, and the many other stories of violence from the African Great Lakes compels leaders to imagine new ways of being church and community in Africa. I suggest that the African church turn to Scripture and train her imagination so as to lament the state of today's African communities and send a common cry to God in order to wake him from his long sleep and invite him to show us the way forward.

Biblical stories bring back to our hearts, minds, and memories our experiences and those of our brothers and sisters whom violence has destroyed. Here we will focus on the book of Judges, which is an extended lament about the corruption of religious and political leaders and how such corruption leads to the destruction of society. I find this book an appropriate venue for starting a conversation about

[2]Interview conducted with a female survivor of war violence in eastern DRC.

leadership in Africa and also as an opportunity for us to learn how to lament in the midst of violence. It would certainly have seemed that a book like Lamentations, Jeremiah, or Habakkuk would have been the most appropriate place to begin our scriptural imagination. But I am inviting you into the book of Judges, because the community described in Judges resembles our African communities in many ways. The book deters its readers from seeing themselves as innocent victims being oppressed by others and lamenting the oppression suffered at the hand of others. The book of Judges will show us that our communities are broken, not only by forces from without, but mostly from within. What destroys our countries today is not the evil done to us by some foreign power; it is first of all the result of our own evil ways, and those of our leaders. This is the point that the last part of the book of Judges makes.

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This book is called *shophetim,* the book of people charged with making things right. It is the book about leaders supposed to enact justice and right in society. The irony of the book of Judges is that, in the end, the story turns out to be about selfish, violent, and corrupt leaders. It is no longer about enacting justice. In the first part of the book (1–16), the stories of individual judges are mostly about the struggle of Israel to defend itself against other nations, nations raised by God to punish Israel for its evil ways. The lament that goes up in this part of the book is about God abandoning his people to the hands of foreign nations. But as we keep reading the book, we realize that the enemy is not an outsider, but those from the community. The enemy lives inside each person and within each community or family. In order to read our context of violence and social fragmentation, I focus on the last chapters of this book. Chapters 17 through 21 tell us that the book of Judges speaks of events that took place in a time when "there was no king in Israel and everyone did what was good in his eyes." The result being that those who do what is good in their eyes destroy both themselves and those around them.

In chapters 17 and 18, we encounter the story of an unnamed Levite, who is hired as personal chaplain to work in Micah's personal shrine. Once the Levite accepts to serve him, Micah's reaction is remarkable: "Now I know that the Lord will give me good things, because a Levite has become my priest" (17: 13). The Levite's services are the guarantee for Micah that whatever he does is approved by God. There is no question on the part of Micah about the need for personal transformation, as long as he enjoys the religious endorsement of an Israelite Levite, a member of a group chosen by God as his special possession (Num 3:12) and one of the experts on moral and on national political decisions (see Num 18). While still working for Micah, the same unnamed Levite is taken by force to serve the tribe of Dan

as the priest of the tribe. In both instances, the Levite contents himself with his salary and does not question the actions of Micah or those of the Danites invading other people's territories. This inability of a religious leader to question or lament because of political corruption resound in many of our countries where priests, pastors, preachers, and lay leaders easily collude with corrupt political leaders to corrode all the social structures upon which the life of our societies rests. Are religious leaders able to unite in Burundi or in the Congo and find a way out of the crises in which those countries find themselves? Can Rwandan Christians look at each other and write the history of the last ten years of the twentieth century in their country? Are religious leaders able to question divisive ideologies in their own churches, even when that comes from people who financially support their congregations? Those questions bring us back to the Levite of the book of Judges, whose name we do not know, a feature of his characterization that tells us that this Levite stands as a type, representing those before him and those after him who cover their neighbors "with whitewash, seeing false visions and performing lying divinations, saying, 'Thus says the Lord GOD,' although the LORD has not spoken" (Ezek 22:28).

Another story from the book of Judges is the story that begins in Judges 19–21. Here, we encounter another Levite (still unnamed), who is described within the context of his family. He takes for himself a concubine (presumably a second wife) whom he angers. The concubine leaves him and goes to her father's house. She stays there for four months without hearing from the man who angered her; her man. Stories of women going to their parent's houses after their husbands have offended them are common in African societies. The majority of women who leave their husbands and go to their father's houses expect that their husbands will follow them right away, and *would not wait for four months,* for the more time the husband puts off before coming, the more likely the woman will be exposed to the gossips of the local women. The Levite finally decides to go *in order to speak to her heart* (evidently something he had not done before). So we have here a priest whose family is in disarray. And he seems to be at the heart of the problem! When he arrives at the house of his father-in law, he does not speak to the woman. There is certainly celebration, but no serious conversation happens about past wrongs. The Levite, the concubine, and the father do not seem to be ready to deal with the pain of remembering their past. The five-day celebration seems to be a way for all of them to cover a past that needed to be addressed. Their reconciliation consists in rushing to celebration without examining their painful past. This scene of celebration can question our assumption in some parts of Africa that eating together can heal wounds, even wounds that have not been acknowledged.

After having taken his concubine back, the Levite is on his way back to his home village (the hills of Ephraim in the north of Israel). Along the way, he carefully chooses where to spend the night: "we won't turn into a city of foreigners who are not Israelites. We will travel to Gibeah or Ramah and spend the night there"

(19:12). This priest chooses the people with whom he can interact, the people with whom he can eat and in whose houses he can spend the night. He will learn in a hard way that sometimes national and ethnic identities serve us only as far as they can offer us political dividends. Note the conversation between the Levite and his servant in 19:11–25. As far as the servant is concerned, every town is a possible lodging place for them. But for the Levite, human journey depends on the distinction between "us" and "them." For him, the journey of life in which he and his companions engage is the journey in which one can survive only if he knows how to choose "his people," those who are part of his "we." That statement can of course be true in some instances, but, in this story, it is from within that the community collapses. Gibeah, the place where the outrage takes place, is part of Israel, the Levite's people; but they are, ironically, the ones who will offer a vicious welcome to the Levite and his companions. The Levite's servant, probably less educated on the boundaries between ethnicities, "*blindly*" trusts everyone, and so he tells his master to go spend the night in Jebus. It's remarkable that the place where he does not want to spend the night, Jebus, is Jerusalem (the future holy city). We can pause here and wonder whether, in our religious communities, our pastors and our intellectuals are not the deposits of constructed identities, weapons of divisions and death in our societies. Sometimes education institutions and church settings, instead of embodying a new way of being human in a broken world, hold on to ideologies that hinder the flourishing of human life.

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In Gibeah, an old man, a foreigner residing in that city, welcomes the Levite into his house. As soon as he arrives there, eating, conversation, and drinking take place; but these moments of conviviality are terribly interrupted by the city bandits/toughs who come to rape the man. The hope of being welcomed by *his* own people flies through the open air of the night. His own people have turned into his enemies, those who want to rape him and wound his spirit. We know of the story of Sodom where the villagers attempted to rape God's messengers in Gen 19 (19:4). Just like in Gen 19, where Lot offered his daughters to be raped (though they were not raped), here too, in order to save the man from being raped, the host offers his own daughter and the Levite's concubine. Following Gen 19, one would expect a miraculous escape of both women. But here, before even the men of the city advanced to the house, the traveler who felt threatened rushes to throw his concubine to the hands of the bandits of the city. "And they raped her and abused her all night until morning, then let her go at the approach of dawn" (Judg 19:25 NAS). In contexts of war, rape is often used as a weapon of war. It is not about sexual gratifica-

tion; it is used both as a way of controlling the raped person and as a way of demoralizing the community in which those people live. And this is even more so when the raped person has some authority within the community. What we see in the case of this woman, the concubine of the Levite, is that rape leaves her without life, and she collapses at the door of the house in which her husband is sleeping.

Note here the contrast between the woman being raped outside and the man sleeping inside the house. The Levite is the kind of person who cannot be interrupted even by the pain and suffering of even those closest to him. His life goes on, even when right around him nothing seems to be working. This Levite is no different from the first Levite (17–18) who could not be bothered by the behavior of those who offered him gifts and salary. The man is secure inside the house, while the woman collapses at the door. The woman here functions as metaphor for the collapse of Israelite society. With her collapsed body, as the story shows later, it is the entire community of Israel that has fallen apart. Those who abandon their sisters, mothers, and wives to the demons of sexual violence are themselves participants in the collapse of their society. Raping a woman or not preventing her rape is like burning your house while your children are asleep.

The next scene of the story takes place when the man finally wakes up. He then intends to resume his day as usual. But there is a body lying at the door. He cannot pretend there is nothing in his way. This is quite an interruption created by a body. The Levite commands her to rise, but no words come from the dead body. She simply lies there to be seen. Her husband has now to learn a new way of travelling, because he has a body. He must now realize that a maimed and raped woman does not walk the same road of life as the person who just rose from the comfort of a bed. Indeed, walking is not what dead people do; they block our roads, and invite us to reflection and imagination of a new way of being. The body of the woman is the loud cry of a victim who refuses to be forgotten.

Curiously, the Levite is not interrupted by the woman's body. Without expressing any emotion, the Levite—a religious functionary—carries his dead concubine home, and once home, he dismembers her, dividing her body into twelve parts and sending them to the tribes of Israel, in order to incite the nation to anger. The obstructing body is now dismembered. It becomes the message sent in horror to all the children of Israel. A body that was already abused is, in the end, used as the seed of total civil war. What we see here is the usurpation of the wounds of an individual as an excuse for the construction of national wounds that are disconnected from the pain of the suffering person. This civil war, of course, is the direct consequence of the corruption of a leader who is focused on protecting himself and on enlisting the community into his own aspirations. But the violence done to the woman is used as an incentive for the destruction of society.

The story of the Levite and his concubine begins as an ordinary dispute between a man and a woman and ends in total war. Family disputes and violence in families are the foundation upon which leaders build dysfunctional societies. Cor-

rupt leaders, in order to support their actions, often depend on compromised religious leadership and dysfunctional families. The civil war that destroys Israel in Judges (and almost eliminates the tribe of Benjamin) is the dramatization of human relationships that were already broken within families.

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After fratricidal killing in Israel, the survivors weep and wail, "Why, O LORD, God of Israel, has this come about in Israel, so that one tribe should be *missing* today in Israel?" (Judg 21:3 NAS). This cry to God is a lament in sight of the destruction of Israelite society. Israel survived the iron chariots of Adoni-Bezek, the power of the Philistines, the strength of Eglon, but now has become its own enemy. The lament at the end of this book is then the cry of a community stuck and incapable of healing itself.

This quick survey of the stories of the two Levites points to some actions that can inspire African communities in our current context dominated by corruption, violence, and social unrest. First, these stories stand as an indictment against religious leaders who function as passive beneficiaries of the milk of the royal cows, and neither criticize corruption and violence nor dare to console those our political classes crush. Second, these stories place in the midst of our communities a body that interrupts our usual journeys and compels us to notice it. The deaths and rapes of the many children and women cannot be viewed simply as ordinary events which deserve no particular attention. Third, and most importantly, rather than using the suffering of those slain bodies as an opportunity for one's own benefit, honest Christians, who can see what is going on in their societies, can but interrupt their journey in order to lift up their voices in lamentation toward God. Lament of course cannot become what we do. When lament is genuine, not performance or profession, it is an interruption, not the mainstream. Lamenting means we have recognized that the way things are does not resemble what we know about God. We look at the dismembered body of the Levite's concubine and we say that our eyes cannot bear watching that scene. Lament is the cry for God to take notice of where we are, and invite him to enter into the pit where we are and take us out. To lament means breaking in tears when all the means have failed. In many cultures, crying is interpreted as a sign of weakness (and especially men are discouraged to cry). And that is the point of lamenting: we have acknowledged that what is going on in our societies resists any quick solution that we can imagine. By sending out the communal "why" of the community, we hope that our eyes will be clear by the

falling of tears in order for us to gain new visions and dreams new dreams. If bloodshed in Africa, corruption, and all the woes that destroy our communities can generate genuine shame in our communities, then we should allow ourselves to be interrupted in order to lament and hope for new visions. ⊕

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