

*'It's in the darkest places that the light shines brightest'*  
from the foreword by Simon Guillebaud



# MY COUNTRY WEPT

ONE MAN'S INCREDIBLE STORY  
OF FAITH, HOPE AND FORGIVENESS  
IN THE BURUNDIAN CIVIL WAR

Jess Komanapalli

‘Any reader of this book having an open mind and heart will be inspired by the wonderful providential love of God revealed in the life and experiences of Theo. Furthermore, Theo’s faith and courage is an outstanding example and challenge for all readers, be they Christians or not.’

*Canon Stanley Dakin*

‘Jess Komanapalli has written an important work that should be read by everyone. When love overcomes the violence and hate of war, a story of redemption, salvation and hope remains.

‘This story is an extraordinary journey of survival through faith, challenges overcome and the small, unexpected moments of grace that allow us to hold onto our faith in the midst of the horrors of war. Theo faced death at every turn as he navigated the civil war raging through his home. He survived to tell his tale. Through his telling, may you find the courage to see God’s almighty presence in every trial you face.

‘This book is the story of how one young man looked to God to save him, teach him, and had the courage and passion to save others. It is in this great hope – the understanding that we are all called to forgive and serve, have the patience to allow the process to unfold and the fortitude to endure it – that the Lord will shine his light to a weary world.

‘I highly recommend the reading of *My Country Wept*.’

*Scott Norling, International Consultant Asia Director,  
Joyce Meyer Ministries*

‘Theo’s story is deeply moving and powerful. He tells of some of the sorrows and sufferings of his beloved and beautiful nation, Burundi. His life’s journey reveals both the amazing rescue and calling of God without avoiding the hard question of why he

has stayed alive whilst others have tragically died. I was moved deeply by his honesty and by the mercy of God at work in him.

‘This book will inspire and help all readers discover more of God in Jesus Christ. It will also help readers understand more of the history and shaping of the nation that is both beautiful and tragic Burundi.’

*Paul Butler, Bishop of Durham*

‘A breathtaking sweep through the eyes of a man who has been saved by grace multiple times amid enduring and generational mess in East Africa. This book takes your breath away, it’s written with such gritty reality and reflects ultimately on the Saviour whom Theo loves and follows. Inspirational, and everyone who seeks to understand how to engage across cultures in missional life and work needs to read this book.’

*Andy Dipper, Principal & Chief Executive,  
All Nations Christian College*

‘What a compelling story of survival, strength of character, “unexplainable” miracles, and the undeniable belief that God watches over us.

‘It is a wonderful true story of how God can bring a life out of darkness, peace through forgiveness, restitution and hope from pain.

‘It challenges each one of us to make a difference in our world today. Bless Burundi.’

*Susan Botta, Senior Pastor, C3 Church Carlingford,  
Sydney, Australia*

‘In telling his story so vividly, honestly and respectfully, Theodore has rendered a great service to the whole nation of

Burundi. It is my strong conviction that in listening together to personal stories of pain and suffering like his, a genuine mutual compassion can emerge and the road for forgiveness and reconciliation gets paved. I whole-heartedly recommend this book.'

*Emmanuel Ndikumana, Founder and President of Partners Trust International, Regional Director for the Lausanne Movement for Francophone Africa and Board Chair for the Great Lakes Initiatives for Reconciliation.*

# **My Country Wept**

**One man's incredible story of faith, hope  
and forgiveness in the Burundian civil war**

**Jess Komanapalli**



**Authentic**

## Secrets of the Past

Smack!

The cane hit the back of my legs.

Smack! Smack!

My right arm stung like a burn from the double blow.

Smack!

Another rap made my back arch in agony.

Smack! Smack! Smack!

The cane continued to thrash my body several more times as my eyes flooded with tears and I cried out loudly in pain.

Forty pairs of eyes were glued to my punishment as they sat at their wooden desks.

Smack!

I fought to hold back my tears as the cane finally came to a halt by my teacher's side.

I couldn't allow myself to cry. Not this time.

My crime? I had been ten minutes late for the start of the school day. Just ten minutes!

It had been out of my control. Mama had asked me to fetch some water before my three-mile walk to school. And then I had raced to school as fast as my legs could carry me. Surely, I deserved a chance to explain? And, moreover, even if I had been to blame, had I really deserved such a cruel beating?

Anger rose from the pit of my stomach, sweeping through every inch of me.

It was clear to me that my teacher had jumped at the chance to lash out at me again. Had I been just a single minute late, I was sure my fate would have been the same.

It wasn't the first time I felt I had been unfairly reprimanded. These harsh beatings happened every time a mistake was spotted in my schoolwork – every time I was caught not paying attention to the blackboard – every time I was seen talking to my classmates while the teacher explained a new exercise or rule.

I was just 11 years old and, to my mind, I had every right to be enraged at the beating my teacher had just given me – and at every other heavy beating that had preceded it.

Through my eyes, my teacher's actions were hateful acts of injustice and I felt sick to my core when I thought about the reason behind them. Less than half a year back, my father had revealed a secret of his that had taught me this reason and much more besides.

'Sit down now, Theo!' my teacher barked, interrupting my vivid recollections of that day. He turned to the blackboard to find his chalk.

But I knew I wouldn't be able to obey. I just couldn't bring myself to. Not after remembering the painful truths I was now aware of. I was too angry. Far too angry.

Before I could stop myself, my mouth had opened and I was spitting out an incensed accusation.

The words drew instant gasps of disbelief and the full attention of my fellow classmates.

'I know why you always beat me! It's because I'm a Hutu and you're a Tutsi! And you've been killing our people since 1972!'

My teacher spun around to face me. His alarmed expression met my raging stare. Starting to open his mouth, he quickly shut it again.

He was speechless. After all, how was he supposed to respond to such an outburst? No one would have ever dared to challenge him, let alone mention the things I had just mentioned.

But I had truly had enough. I refused to be subject to his cruel punishments any longer just because I had been born a Hutu, and he a Tutsi.

‘Go outside!’ my teacher demanded, regaining his voice. ‘Get out of the classroom!’

This time I chose to obey, kicking up dust on the dirt floor as I bolted out through the door. Sticking close to the brick wall of our school building, I came to stand beside the paneless window frame which looked in on my class.

My whole body was shaking and my heart pounded in my chest – partly out of anger and partly from the adrenaline which had been churned up by my audacious act.

My classmates remained quiet and, peeking in, I could see my teacher had returned to the blackboard to write the day’s lesson.

*I showed him! I thought. That evil Tutsi! I should have taken his cane and struck him back! Beating me so badly for being ten minutes late! I really showed him!*

I hated my teacher and wished I could inflict on him the same punishments he had tortured me with. But the reality was, my hatred for him and his vicious punishments wasn’t the only frustration at the heart of my anger that day.

This was because, as a result of what my father had shared with me months earlier, I had been harbouring a mixture of pent-up emotions that had finally come to the surface when my teacher had dared to beat me cruelly again.



To understand what had caused these wounded emotions in part, it was important to first understand the tribal complexities of my country in which – one fine day on 15 April 1974 – I had been born.

Africa's Burundi – a tiny, land-locked country which lies a little south-east of the continent's centre – was once part of Runda-Urundi, until its colonial authority Belgium granted independence to both Rwanda and Burundi in 1962. Before this time, the region's three tribes had largely lived together without conflict or tensions. These tribes were the Hutus, making up 85 per cent of the population, the Tutsis, making up 14 per cent, and the Twa pygmies, making up just one per cent. But its Belgium rulers had favoured Tutsis – some saying it was because they were more adept at business and excelled in educated positions, while Hutus were seen as less intelligent and more fitting for agricultural roles. Because of this, Tutsis dominated in areas of politics and leadership.

In 1965, Hutu military units revolted after the Burundian monarch appointed a Tutsi Prime Minister in place of the country's first Hutu Prime Minister, Joseph Bamina. Unrest and civil war subsequently followed, with Bamina being assassinated shortly afterwards. Hutu peasants rioted, murdering around five hundred Tutsis and burning down Tutsi homes. In retaliation, members of the Hutu military and police, as well as other Hutu politicians, were killed.

As a result, by the end of the 1960s, and with the quashing of the war, the military and political arenas were now controlled and dominated by Tutsis. Even access to education became difficult for Hutus.

In 1972, unhappy with this unfair shift of control and power, a Hutu uprising took place which involved rioting and

the slaughter of Tutsis. The Tutsi Army was able to quash this, but what followed was an equally horrific retaliation. Backed by the Government, the Army targeted Hutu students. They visited secondary schools and rounded up Hutu students to take them away. Those taken away were never seen again. Of those murdered, estimations lie between 100,000 to 300,000 victims. Many escaped the massacre by fleeing across their border to Tanzania and Congo, remaining as refugees for decades to come.

Though peace settled for a lengthy period afterwards, tensions between Hutus and Tutsis still remained.

Up until the age of 11, I had been blissfully unaware of my country's troubles and how my identity as a Hutu might ever be a problem.

And if my father had his way, my ignorance would have carried on for a lot longer. But all this came to an end one day when I stumbled across some documents of his that I wasn't supposed to read. After I had read them, my father revealed to me a secret he had hoped I would never find out.

I first made the discovery one lethargic summer's afternoon when it was far too humid to play outside.

My father was still at his field placement where he worked as an Agricultural Monitor for the Ministry of Agriculture in our small rural village. It might have sounded like a grand job but it wasn't grand in any way. My father was poorly educated, never having started his secondary school education. Instead, he received a meagre wage that was only a small support for our family of six. What Papa did have was a sufficiently large piece of land on which we grew all the vegetables and grains we needed for our daily meals. This land stretched out behind our modest, four-roomed, brick bungalow.

We weren't rich by any standards, but even with its corrugated iron-sheet roof, we had the best home in the village commune and my father was well-respected.

That day, mother had been out in the fields, with my one-year-old sister, Didavine, strapped to her back. My two younger brothers, Normand, nine, and Nixon, five, had shown no interest in playing with me so I was wandering from room to room in our house, looking for an object or activity to hold my interest. It was after I had walked into my parents' bedroom that I spied the open padlock on the wooden storage box which had always sat to the side of their bed. This storage box was used by my father to preserve his important documents – ones I knew he didn't want anyone to touch or see as the padlock was always closed.

Today, for some reason, the lock had been left open. I couldn't resist drawing closer – I'd always wondered about the information those important documents held.

Lifting the lid of the box, I reached in and drew out a handful of papers. I was a good reader but I couldn't understand the terms I found on the first few pieces of papers. Then a green folder caught my eye and I picked it up instead.

Opening it, I saw it contained my father's primary school reports. One was titled 'Year 6 Report' and several others were titled 'Year 7 Report', which was, at that time, the last year of primary school education in Burundi. Studying them more closely, I was surprised by what I read.

I'd had end-of-year school reports like these myself and, though I had always fared well, they were never as good as my father's. Each document ranked my father as being the highest academic achiever in his class – a clear number '1' printed on each one.

*This doesn't make sense!* I thought to myself. *Was Papa the cleverest student in his class?*

Each report told me my father was a highly intelligent student – brilliant in every subject. Yet my father had never studied at any secondary school. Instead, he had repeated his Year 7 education at different schools.

In addition, every Year 7 report he had showed Papa had ranked first in his class. So why had he repeated the same year? He had had the potential to go far, but what had happened?

My curiosity burned. Why had my father remained a farmer and a low-paid Government worker when he had the chance to achieve a higher ranking in life?

That evening, as my siblings and I sat on a wooden bench in the kitchen compound, warming ourselves around Mama's cooking fire, I resolved to find out the answers to those troubling questions. Mama was busy tending to a mixture of beans and vegetables in a clay pot she had set on the fire. It was seven o'clock and Normand and Nixon sat quietly beside me, fighting to keep their eyes open until our meal was dished up. Outside in the darkness, I could hear the drone of crickets singing, but there was just one sound I was listening out for – my father's arrival from work.

Mama was spooning out the meal onto our plates, when Papa finally stepped into the room.

I gave him a few minutes to settle by the fire before I pounced on him.

'Papa!' I said. 'I know you were number one in your classes at school. I saw your reports. What happened to you? Why didn't you study more and become someone important, like a teacher or doctor?'

My father, a stern disciplinarian, was taken aback by my ambush. I could tell by his narrowed eyes he was furious with me.

'Theo, what were you doing looking through my papers? You are not supposed to touch those things! Let me tell you,

boy, you will get a thorough beating if you ever touch them again!’

‘But Papa . . . !’ I protested. ‘You haven’t answered my question. What happened to you? Why didn’t you go to secondary school?’

‘Be quiet, boy!’ my father shouted. ‘What business is it of yours . . . ?’

‘But Papa, I . . . ’

‘Theo! Enough!’

My father glared at me as if he would carry out his threat at any second.

I held my tongue that evening, but now my curiosity was even more fired up.

Why wasn’t my father telling me the truth? What was he so angry about?

During the next few days, I tried questioning Papa again, but to no avail. He refused to offer me any explanation. But he hadn’t counted on my persistence.

Another evening after Papa had arrived home again, I made a further attempt to excavate the truth.

We were sitting around Mama’s cooking fire once more, huddled together as our empty stomachs waited for our meal.

‘Papa, you always tell me it’s important to study. Why won’t you tell me why you didn’t carry on your schooling when you were so good at your subjects?’

‘Oh, son, won’t you stop with your questions?’ Papa said, fatigue etching his voice. ‘What do you want me to tell you?’

‘I want to know what happened, Papa,’ I said. ‘How can I accept you were an excellent student but that you chose not to study further?’

‘Chose not to?’ Papa said. ‘That is not what happened, Theo. It really wasn’t my choice.’

‘It wasn’t?’

‘No, son.’

‘But how wasn’t it? What happened?’

Papa sighed deeply.

‘Oh, Theo, you have much to learn about your country and its people . . .’

And with much resignation in his voice, tinged at times with pain and sadness, Papa began to tell me his story.

It was true. Papa had been an exceptional student and had hoped to go on to secondary education and then to university. But each year he was told he had failed his Year 7 exam and couldn’t proceed any further. Papa would then enrol in a different school and start the school year again, but the outcome was always the same – he would be informed he hadn’t gained the marks needed to enter secondary school. Of course, he was aware this wasn’t a coincidence. All around the country, other bright Hutus were also being told they had failed their primary exams, with no hope of entering into further education. It was just as the 1972 riots broke out, having enrolled into a boarding school some distance away from his home during another of his attempts to pass the Year 7 exam, that Papa’s dreams were finally extinguished. One day, during the middle of a lesson, a group of Army soldiers arrived and started calling out names, ordering Hutu students and teachers alike to stand up and exit with them. Rounding them up, they were taken away. Fortunately, my father’s name wasn’t called out and, as soon as the Army had left, he ran home as fast as he could. Recognising the fate of those who had been taken, my father, along with his brothers and a few neighbours, chose to hide out in some caves during the following six months. Their survival was dependent on the fugitives taking daily turns to venture outside and bring

food back for the group. Meanwhile, Hutu students all over the country were being murdered, especially those in secondary education.

It was after the killing spree had subsided that my father returned back home. But now his mother was adamant that it meant the end of school for him. Papa was made to accept his fate – he would remain uneducated and be put to work farming instead.

‘So these are the reasons, Theo,’ my father told me. ‘Now please, no more questions for tonight.’

I remained quiet for the rest of the evening, brooding over everything I had just been told.

As my father had been relating his tale, my spirit felt battered by every word he had spoken. He had mentioned the names of Tutsis he had studied with who had gone on to find great jobs in the Government or held other esteemed positions.

I couldn’t help but feel bitter at the injustice he had suffered. Who knew what my father could have made of his life if he hadn’t been denied his education?

Why did the Tutsis dislike us so much? Why did they hold all the privileged roles in my country, while us Hutus had to remain in the background? Didn’t they care about treating us as equals?

It was hard not to feel hatred towards those who had persecuted my people in such a cruel way.

Before, I had perceived no division between myself and another Tutsi brother. Now I understood that we were different – that our country’s leaders and Government viewed us as different, too.

That day, I resolved that education would be my utmost priority. I would strive to excel in my studies. Yes, I would become

an esteemed surgeon. No one would hold me back the way my father had been held back.

Or so I thought. For how could I have predicted what the future had in store for me?

As time passed, I never forgot the painful history lesson my father had taught me that night by the cooking fire. As a Hutu, I was aware of the dominance of Tutsis in the military, political and judicial worlds. And memories of my father's story would surface again with the occasional taunt by a Tutsi student in the playground, '*Wa ghitu we!*' (You Hutu!) Yet life was relatively peaceful in Burundi and tensions were suppressed. In 1988, after I had turned 14, Hutus in a northern province, enraged by their feelings of injustice, began attacking their Tutsi neighbours. In return, the Army killed those who had revolted, along with other innocent Hutus. Though reports were alarming, the unrest was confined to the north and was soon controlled. Life continued as normal for us.

During that same year, another important event happened in my life. Despite being raised in a Christian household, I became a born-again Christian. I gave my life to Jesus, accepting him as my Lord and Saviour.

Mama was the church-goer in our family and always insisted her children attend Sunday school and pray together every night. But it was after I started my secondary education that I joined a group called the Christian Union. Here, my knowledge about the Bible increased and I was disciplined in my faith. I joined a prayer group and started singing in the school choir. I was fervent about my new convictions. I loved Jesus and hoped to serve him with my life in some way. I would become a surgeon and perhaps use my spare



time to preach the Word, too. Over the next four years, as my faith grew, I was often requested to teach our group of young Christians.

In 1992, when I was 18, I joined a boarding school in Gitega, 75 miles from my parents' home. There I became head of its Christian Union. With a good group of Christian brothers around me, the skills of a leader being nurtured in me, and my studies going well, I felt excited about my future and what I could achieve.

But, as optimistic as my prospects looked, a fateful event happened on 21 October 1993 that changed everything.

That date would forever be etched in my memory.

It was a day that meant that life as I had known it would never be the same again.