

## Article

# Reimagining Violence in Contemporary Africa: Catholic Martyrdom and the Ethics of Sacrificial Solidarity in Burundi

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**Abstract:** This article discusses the enculturated Catholic ethics of martyrdom embodied by the Martyrs of Fraternity of Burundi, a group of students whose cause is now before the Vatican's Congregation for the Causes of Saints for refusing to separate into Hutus and Tutsis during Burundi's 1993–2005 civil war. Engaging *Fratelli Tutti* from a local African perspective, it considers how the conviction that all human beings are brothers and sisters is to find concrete embodiment. Its argument develops Emmanuel Katongole's assertion that the African church provides a living witness of what hope looks like in contexts of violence and war, drawing on Burundian scholarship and more than sixty interviews conducted in Burundi from 2018 to 2024 to develop a thick narrative of fraternal martyrdom and the ethics of Ubuntu. By placing sacrificial solidarity rather than violence at the center of the story of the Martyrs of Fraternity, Burundian Catholics reimagine their civil war in ethical terms. This Burundian embodiment of an ethics of sacrificial solidarity, solidly grounded in its original cultural substratum, stands as a resource for a world increasingly engulfed by war, refusing to let violence have the last word in a story of fraternal love hallowed by sacrifice.

**Keywords:** Burundi; martyrdom; fraternity; Ubuntu; *Fratelli Tutti*; African ethics; Catholic ethics; war; Bashingantahe; Ibanga



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## 1. Introduction

In his 2020 Encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis raises the question of how “the conviction that all human beings are brothers and sisters is not to remain an abstract ideal but to find concrete embodiment” (Francis 2020, §28). Francis’s vision of “a universal aspiration to fraternity” is profoundly dialogic, for he argues that “love for one’s own land, one’s own people, one’s own cultural roots” is a necessary foundation for fraternal openness between peoples, and asserts that “[a] country that moves forward while remaining solidly grounded in its original cultural substratum is a treasure for the whole of humanity” (Francis 2020, §8, 143, 137). My essay considers a concrete embodiment of fraternity grounded in the cultural substratum of Burundi, a majority Catholic nation<sup>1</sup> in the Great Lakes region of Africa whose postcolonial history has been marked by cycles of political violence between Hutus and Tutsis. I focus on the story of those popularly venerated as the Martyrs of Fraternity of Buta, a group of minor seminarians who refused to separate into Hutus and Tutsis when their school was attacked during the country’s 1993–2005 civil war, which was fought along ethnic lines. For their refusal to betray one another, forty were killed and many others wounded. The massacre at Buta Minor Seminary might have taken its place alongside many others during the civil war, typically followed by indiscriminate reprisals against unarmed civilians. No reprisals, however, were taken after the attack. Instead, Zacharie Bukuru, Rector of the Seminary, and Bernard Bududira, the local Bishop of Bururi Diocese, exhorted the army, the state, and the families of the murdered seminarians to honor the example of the students who had died hand-in-hand, Hutus and Tutsis, praying for their assassins (Bukuru 2015, p. 106). Ten days after the massacre, at the Mass marking the partial lifting of mourning for the seminarians, Bishop Bududira gave their testimony a name when he promised to build a sanctuary to the Martyrs of Fraternity.

Financed by a personal gift from Saint John Paul II, the sanctuary was inaugurated on the first anniversary of the massacre and has since become a major pilgrimage site in Burundi, drawing thousands of worshippers a year. In 2019, the Congregation for the Causes of Saints opened its investigation of the Forty Servants of God of Buta, together with a Burundian priest and three missionaries who also bore witness to the love of Christ in the face of political violence. Their collective cause has been postulated as the Martyrs of Fraternity of Burundi.

As the Church takes up Francis's call for an ethics of fraternity that is no mere abstraction, She might well look to the Martyrs of Fraternity of Buta. Francis argues in *Fratelli Tutti* that "[t]he true worth of the different countries of our world is measured by their ability to think not simply as a country but also as part of the larger human family. This is seen especially in times of crisis" ([Francis 2020](#), §141). Congolese historian Jacques Depelchin makes a similar claim when he affirms that "ethics are alive and well within African societies, even among those which, as in Rwanda and Burundi, have gone astray", adding that "the sense of ethics can be highest in the very arenas from which it seems to have completely disappeared" ([Depelchin 2005](#), p. 29). My essay takes seriously the paradox that times of crisis, such as Burundi's civil war, and arenas from which a sense of ethics might seem to have completely disappeared, such as the African Great Lakes region in the 1990s, may provide the very conditions in which to reimagine Catholic ethics today. In this way, it builds on Emmanuel Katongole's assertions that "the African church provides a living witness of what hope looks like in the context of violence and war", and that "the African church's witness of hope can reinvigorate and rekindle the global church's mission as a sacrament of peace in the world" ([Katongole 2017](#), pp. 264–65). It also responds to Simon Mary Asese A. Aihiokhai's call to the Church in Africa to reflect "on ways it can embody hope that mediates the experience of abundant life by Africans", and his conviction that hope does not reside in the imagination but is in fact embodied ([Aihiokhai 2023](#), pp. 100–1). Katongole has argued for "the rich theological and practical reverberations in the African context" of the stories of martyrs, whom he describes as "the holy innocents of Africa's violent history" ([Katongole 2017](#), p. 244). While honoring the ultimate sacrifice of their lives, he emphasizes the ethical importance of how martyrs lived, asserting that "the significance of their 'witness' directs our attention to everyday forms of living and peaceableness that constitute the shalom of God's love", and that the memory of martyrs "requires the telling and retelling of the thick narrative of their stories, for the power resides in the details of how they lived" ([Katongole 2017](#), p. 252).

Katongole briefly discusses the Buta martyrdom as an example of how martyrs point to a communion that cuts across boundaries in a world deeply divided by racial, national, and ethnic loyalties ([Katongole 2017](#), pp. 256–58). My own essay focuses on how Burundian Catholics have been telling and retelling the story of the Martyrs of Fraternity of Buta for more than 25 years, and how that thick narrative reimagines a Catholic ethics of sacrificial solidarity from a local African perspective. Drawing extensively on Burundian scholarship and analysis, I consider how the Buta Martyrs' witness to fraternal love incorporates and reimagines a longstanding Burundian ethics of sacrificial solidarity. My exploration of the Burundian ethical imagination emerges primarily, however, from a grounded methodology of deep listening to Burundian Catholics in their own context. Since 2018, I have conducted more than sixty interviews in Burundi with survivors of the Buta massacre, family members of students who were killed, teachers and other staff members at the seminary, Buta neighbors, diocesan personnel, and other Burundian intellectuals. I have asked them to reflect with me on the nature of Christian martyrdom, on Burundian traditions or values that might be comparable to it, on the importance of commemorating martyrs, and on the particular message of the Martyrs of Buta. What is striking in this body of testimony is how little is said about the terrible violence of the attack. Neither does it develop a discourse of accusation or blame directed against the attackers, on the one hand, nor those who were charged with the students' safety, on the other, including seminary staff and the regular army, whose provincial headquarters is only ten kilometers from Buta. Rather

than dwelling on violence and blame, those I have interviewed, including survivors of the attack and parents who lost children to it, emphasize the exemplary witness to fraternal love offered by their classmates and children.

By placing sacrificial solidarity rather than violence at the center of the story of the Martyrs of Fraternity, Burundian Catholics reimagine the narrative of their civil war in ethical terms. Survivor Nicolas Nyabenda, now a priest and professor of philosophy, asserts that “on the one hand, the Buta martyrdom symbolizes all crimes resulting from an ideology of discrimination. On the other hand, it symbolizes a self-emptying so that others might live” (Nicolas Nyabenda, letter to author, 11 November 2018). Nyabenda was seriously wounded during the attack when he returned to the dormitory to help others after hiding a wounded schoolmate in the outdoor toilets. He emphasizes the ethical and religious training the seminarians had received, claiming that “[w]hat happened at Buta is the fruit of an educative process built on human values and Christian values” (*ibid.*). The human values to which Nyabenda refers are grounded in Burundian humanism or Ubuntu. Elizabeth Foster has argued that African values of personalism and the dignity of the human person strongly influenced Saint John XXIII as he prepared for the Second Vatican Council, suggesting a place for Ubuntu in the renewal of the Church (Foster 2019, pp. 257–72). Subsequent pontiffs have affirmed the important contributions to Church dialogue drawn from “Africa’s rich intellectual, cultural and religious heritage”, in the words of Benedict XVI (Benedict XVI 2011, §9),<sup>2</sup> and to the practice of Africans looking inside themselves to the riches of their own traditions and faith, as exhorted by Saint John Paul II (John 1995, §48).<sup>3</sup> These statements indicate the Vatican’s growing understanding that ethical discourses can no longer be framed in monologic terms, but must indeed engage in the fruitful exchange of reciprocal gifts between nations and cultures that Francis promotes as a foundation for universal fraternity (Francis 2020, §133–41). In the sections that follow, I consider how the language and ethics of Burundian Ubuntu inform the responses of Burundian Catholics to the Buta martyrdom, allowing them to frame the Martyrs’ witness in terms of ethical institutions and values rather than the dynamics of fear, blame, and vengeance that drive political violence. I focus in particular on the Institution of the Bashingantahe, or Council of Sages, traditionally charged with maintaining local justice and social harmony, and the national virtue of Ibanga, whose senses include sacrificial fidelity to one’s social role or duty, an unshakeable commitment to the truth, and an anchored interior life, all of which led to its early adoption by Burundian Catholics to express the idea of an all-encompassing faith. In my conclusion, I suggest how the thick narrative of the Martyrs of Fraternity of Buta dialogically engages and reimagines a Catholic ethics of sacrificial solidarity and what this enculturated African reimagining offers to a world increasingly at war.

## 2. Telling and Retelling an Exemplary Story

To fully appreciate the exemplary nature of the story of the Martyrs of Fraternity of Buta, one must have some understanding of the context of Burundi’s civil war and the politicization of Hutu and Tutsi identities in the decades following Burundian independence in 1962. The nation’s relatively peaceful transition to independence had already been marred by the 1961 assassination of recently elected Prime Minister Louis Rwagasore, a prince of the royal family who enjoyed broad support across the population, and who collaborated effectively with Hutus, Tutsis, his own princely class of Ganwas, and Swahili-speaking Muslims in the ethnically inclusive party UPRONA (*Unité pour le progrès national*—Unity for National Progress) that won over 80 percent of a high-turnout vote in the 1961 legislative elections. Divisions within UPRONA’s leadership after Rwagasore’s assassination took on an increasingly ethnic cast in the first years of independence, however, aggravated in part by the “social revolution” unfolding in neighboring Rwanda, which drove thousands of Rwandan Tutsis into exile, including 50,000 in Burundi’s capital, Bujumbura (Lemarchand 1994, p. 60). By 1965, Hutu and Tutsi identities had been thoroughly politicized in Burundi (Lemarchand 1970, pp. 197–227; Chrétien and Dupaquier 2007, pp. 18–29). After marginalized Hutu members of UPRONA led a local uprising in 1965, the army responded with

indiscriminate massacres of local Hutu civilians and a broader purge of Hutu officers in the army and police. A subsequent Hutu uprising in 1972, though quickly put down and largely confined to the south, led to massive and indiscriminate reprisals by the army and UPRONA's youth wing throughout Burundi, targeting Hutu males and emerging elites in particular, including high school students. The 1985 United Nations *Whitaker Report* subsequently classified the 1972 state killings of Burundian Hutus as genocide ([United Nations Economic and Social Council 1985](#), §24). No action was taken by international bodies to intervene at the time, despite a clear understanding within and outside Africa that genocide was taking place in Burundi ([Bowen et al. 1973](#), pp. 1–27). Estimates of those killed range from 80,000 to 250,000, or 3.5 to 5% of the country's 3.5 million people ([Lemarchand and Martin 1974](#), p. 5), representing a literal decimation of Hutu men who left an estimated 70,000 widows and 150,000 to 250,000 orphans ([Chrétien and Dupaquier 2007](#), p. 282).

In the decades following the 1972 genocide, UPRONA governed Burundi as a single-party state, largely excluding Hutus from positions of influence, and changing leadership exclusively via party coup ([Mukuri 2013](#), p. 3). In the early 1990s, under pressure from international partners, the UPRONA government began to integrate Hutus into the civil service and to allow greater freedom of expression and association as it prepared for multi-party elections. The 1993 presidential election was won decisively by Melchior Ndadaye, Burundi's first Hutu and first civilian president, and his FRODEBU party (*Front Pour la Démocratie au Burundi*—Front For Democracy in Burundi) carried the legislative elections in a landslide victory ([Mukuri 2013](#), pp. 373, 380). Ndadaye's victory was quickly followed by a failed military coup shortly after his inauguration. Three months later, on 21 October 1993, he was assassinated by officers of the Burundian army. In the days that followed, interethnic violence broke out all over the country, with Hutus killing Tutsis in retaliation for Ndadaye's assassination, and Tutsi civilians and military killing Hutus ([United Nations Security Council 1996](#), §466–69, 483, 486). FRODEBU's attempts to stabilize the country suffered a major blow when their new president, Cyprien Ntaryamira, was killed in the shooting down of Rwandan President Juvénal Habyarimana's plane over Kigali on 6 April 1994. With the government unable to control its own army, which the 1996 United Nations Security Council delegation would describe as a "power unto itself" and "engaged, with total impunity, in the large scale killing of civilians" (*ibid.*, §24), FRODEBU members in eastern Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of Congo) founded the *Conseil National Pour la Défense de la Démocratie* (National Council for the Defense of Democracy), or CNDD, in July 1994, followed by its armed wing, the *Forces pour la Défense de la Démocratie* (Forces for the Defense of Democracy), or FDD, in September, with the objectives of restoring democratically elected institutions, fighting human rights violations, and defending the population against the army ([Mukuri 2021](#), pp. 47, 56). The CNDD–FDD operated as an autonomous political movement, joining other armed Hutu movements combating the regular army and each other during the 1993–2005 civil war. In July of 1996, the army overthrew the FRODEBU government, and former UPRONA president Major Pierre Buyoya returned to power. Unable to end the war and hampered by regional sanctions, Buyoya agreed to begin negotiations with armed Hutu movements in 1998. In August 2000, the Arusha Peace and Reconciliation Agreement was signed by the National Assembly and the Government of Burundi, along with ten political parties and three armed political movements. By 2005, when almost all parties to the civil war had signed, Burundi held its first democratic elections since 1993. These were carried by the CNDD–FDD, which has remained the party in power ever since.

The 2005 elections marked the end of a civil war that affected all regions of the country, killing 300,000, driving 400,000 into exile, and internally displacing 800,000. During this period of mass violence, schools were repeatedly targeted, causing twenty percent of university and high school students to abandon their studies by 1995 ([Daley 2008](#), p. 112), and a decline by more than one third in school enrollments by 2003 ([Obura 2008](#), p. 94). The Catholic church's minor seminaries did not escape, with a failed attempt to bring an

armed band into Mureke Minor Seminary in the north ([Siryuyumunsi 2002](#), p. 171), and a successful attack on Ciya Minor Seminary in the west by the CNDD-FDD, who abducted and forced several seminarians to join them.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, children and youth were regularly impressed into rebel forces and the army, representing an estimated 14,000 combatants by 2000 ([Daley 2008](#), p. 114), and nearly three percent of young Burundian males are calculated to have joined an armed movement during the civil war ([Uvin 2009](#), p. 179). In response to school massacres immediately following the assassination of President Ndadaye, state boarding schools were closed for four months. When they reopened, a climate of suspicion and mistrust reigned, with students intimidating and terrorizing one another and at times their instructors under the direction of outside parties, and problems ranging from incompetence, partisanship, and absenteeism on the part of overwhelmed staff and school leadership ([Siryuyumunsi 2002](#), pp. 171–78). The UN Special Rapporteur for Burundi noted the killing of Hutu teachers in 1994, mirroring the targeting of Hutu intellectuals in the 1972 genocide ([Daley 2008](#), p. 111). Army massacres of local Hutu populations were particularly severe after attacks on schools ([Nahayo 2005](#), p. 14), in keeping with a general pattern of indiscriminate reprisals against civilians during the civil war ([Daley 2008](#), pp. 111–13; [Longman 1998](#), pp. 97–98).

It was in this context that the CNDD-FDD attacked Buta Minor Seminary on 30 April 1997, killing forty students and seriously wounding twenty-six others. The seminarians' refusal to separate into Hutus and Tutsis, however, broke with the civil war's pattern of interethnic violence and indiscriminate reprisals, telling a different story rooted in fraternal love. The retelling of that story began at their funeral when Rector Zacharie Bukuru and Bishop Bernard Bududira enjoined the mourners not to seek vengeance for the massacre of young people who chose to die together as brothers. Only two days after the attack, then, local church leadership had begun to center the Buta Martyrs' narrative on sacrificial solidarity rather than violence. They received this testimony directly from surviving students on the day of the attack. Shortly after it ended, as Zacharie Bukuru made his way toward the senior dormitory where most of the martyrs died, survivor Stany Niyizonkiza cried out to him, "Father, they wanted to separate us, but we refused!" ([Bukuru 2015](#), p. 99). This is a remarkable statement from a boy who had just endured an attack in which dozens of his schoolmates were killed or injured. Bukuru reports Stany's original Kirundi words as "*Baratubariye ngo dutandukane, turanka*", adding that the verb *gutandukana* (to separate) literally means to tear in two, as in ripping a piece of cloth in half.<sup>5</sup> The verb *turanka* indicates categorical refusal and can also mean to hate. In using it, Stany proclaimed that the order to rip themselves apart as Hutus and Tutsis was hateful to the seminarians, a proposal to be categorically rejected, even at the cost of their lives. The fact that this was the first thing he wanted to communicate to his Rector suggests the extent to which the seminarians had been "educated for communion in life and in death", in the words of fellow survivor Nicolas Nyabenda (Nicolas Nyabenda, letter to author, 11 November 2018). Bukuru has described the culture of peace that he and his team fostered at the seminary during the early years of the civil war, making it one of the few boarding schools in which students of both ethnicities continued to study together ([Bukuru 2015](#), pp. 33–45).<sup>6</sup> Pasteur Manirambona, who also survived the massacre in the senior dormitory, lost his older brother, Patrick Nininahazwe, during the attack. When he found his brother's body, he says, he wanted to die himself. This was not simply an effect of grief, however, for he recalls that he also saw in his brother's death "a noble testament for the country [...] something greater to which I would have liked to give myself. [...] Despite the pain, this unity gave me a certain grace or peace. I did not feel hatred".<sup>7</sup>

In the years following the attack, the seminarians' solidarity became the heart of a practice of commemoration, with monthly Masses to celebrate the Martyrs of Fraternity at Buta Seminary and the Bujumbura Cathedral, as well as annual Masses attended by hundreds of pilgrims. Five years after the massacre, while the civil war continued, Bishop Bududira assessed the initial impact of the seminarians' testimony:

At the price of their lives, they demonstrated that fraternity between ethnic groups is possible, thus giving Burundians hope of one day being able to live together again in peace, the fruit of forgiveness and reconciliation. That is why we have built a church as a gathering place to pray for this much needed peace. Young and old, Catholics and non-Catholics, come to share there in great numbers because they feel that these young Seminarians are models of fully realised humanity and complete love. (Quoted in [Bukuru 2015](#), p. 162.)

In describing the seminarians as “models of fully realised humanity”, Bududira grounds their testimony in the ethics of Burundian Ubuntu, typically translated as “fully realised”, “fully accomplished”, or “elevated humanity” in Burundian scholarship.<sup>8</sup> Bududira also cites survivors’ testimonies of “having heard, on the lips of many of those who died, this one prayer: ‘Forgive them, Lord, for they know not what they do,’” thus situating the Buta martyrdom in relation to Christ’s complete love and sacrifice on the cross (quoted in [Bukuru 2015](#), p. 162).<sup>9</sup> In Bududira’s estimation, the Martyrs of Fraternity testify to an enculturated Catholic ethics rooted in the complete love of Christ and the fully realized humanity of Ubuntu. Rather than being remembered as victims of the civil war’s ideology of fratricidal violence, they are celebrated for embodying the possibility of fraternity between ethnic groups, offering hope that Burundians will once again live together in peace, forgiveness, and reconciliation. In this, they follow the tradition of the Bashingantahe, or Council of Sages, whose sacrificial commitment to truth grounds social harmony in Burundian society, and to whom they are often compared by Burundians. In the next section, I explore how the Martyrs of Fraternity both reflect and redeem the ethics of truth and solidarity traditionally associated with the Institution of the Bashingantahe.

### 3. Bashingantahe: A Commitment to Truth and Social Harmony

The Burundian Institution of the Bashingantahe (singular: Mushingantahe) is believed to date from the early period of the Kingdom of Burundi in the seventeenth century ([Gahama 1999](#), p. 23). It constitutes a body of mature and respected members of the community charged with implementing local justice to safeguard the social order. The term itself signifies to plant (*shinga*) the staff (*intahé*) of justice. Bashingantahe are called to speak the truth and defend the country, working for reconciliation and the restoration of social harmony in their communities, and are expected to defend truth and justice impartially, as captured in the expression *intahé ntigira ubwoko*, or, “the staff of justice has no ethnicity” ([UNESCO 2017](#), pp. 67–70). Candidates for the Institution are ideally invested by Bashingantahe from outside their clan or even their ethnic group so as “to be for all” ([Ntabona 2022](#), p. 28). They are responsible for “good order, tranquillity, truth and peace in their milieu”, not so much by virtue of their administrative function, but rather through their personal integrity ([Ntabona 1985](#), p. 265). Among the qualities required of Bashingantahe, maturity and commitment to the truth are paramount, followed by intelligence, a love of work, and a sense of justice and social responsibility. Tasks entrusted to them include the judging of disputes, the protection of people and property, reconciliation, consultation, and the maintenance of social harmony (*ibid.*, pp. 266–71). In response to the ongoing trauma of political violence in postcolonial Burundi, and the “deep identity crisis that the people and their values have suffered” ([Ntahombaye 1999](#), pp. 1–2), rehabilitating the Institution of the Bashingantahe emerged as an important public policy initiative and a subject of scholarly research in the late twentieth century ([Deslaurier 2003](#)). Cited as the pedestal of national unity in the 1991 Charter of Unity and the 1992 Constitution, the revalorized Institution of the Bashingantahe was quickly overwhelmed, however, by the interethnic violence of the 1993–2005 civil war, operating unevenly, if at times heroically, in different parts of the country ([Ntabona 2010](#), pp. 55–56; [Ntahombaye and Kagabo 2003](#), pp. 1–8). Inscribed in the August 2000 Arusha accord for peace and reconciliation in Burundi ([Deslaurier 2003](#), p. 76), it launched its own rehabilitation in 2002, forming the National Council of Bashingantahe as a civil society organization independent of state or party, in keeping with the Institution’s traditional autonomy ([Ntabona 2010](#), p. 72).

The Institution of the Bashingantahe is one of the cultural precedents Burundians invoke in reflecting on the Martyrs of Fraternity of Buta. Phillip Ntahombaye and Liboire Kagabo conclude their 2003 volume investigating the role of the Bashingantahe during the civil war with a chapter on the Buta seminarians, arguing that their refusal “to betray each other” merits consideration “so that their deeds could serve as a model to others” ([Ntahombaye and Kagabo 2003](#), pp. 2–3).<sup>10</sup> Based on a group interview conducted with survivors three years after the attack, the chapter asserts that what allowed the Buta community “to bring members of ethnic groups together like brothers while elsewhere they were mercilessly killing each other” was “nothing else but their behaving like Bashingantahe” ([Ntahombaye and Kagabo 2003](#), p. 141). It praises in particular the seminary’s commitment to dialogue in the tradition of the Bashingantahe, which allowed the seminarians “to discuss freely the problems of divisions among Hutus and Tutsis so that they could discover the truth for themselves” (*ibid.*). Zacharie Bukuru describes the culture of dialogue the seminary fostered after the assassination of President Ndadaye in 1993, noting that the students “began to develop a taste for asking themselves questions”, and adding that “[d]uring our discussions, everyone might speak: from the young ones in Grade Seven to their elders in the graduating class”. Characterizing these exchanges as “at times quite stormy”, Bukuru affirms that ultimately, “[i]t was these discussions that set us free” ([Bukuru 2015](#), pp. 37, 38). Ntahombaye and Kagabo align the seminary’s culture of dialogue with the Bashingantahe’s commitment to finding the truth through free and open debate, identifying it as a key factor in preparing the seminarians to stay together on the day of the attack. “The pupils themselves sought the truth”, they argue, “and indeed they found it. That is the reason why they resolved to go beyond divisions and to live like brothers” (my emphasis) ([Ntahombaye and Kagabo 2003](#), p. 141).

It is noteworthy that Ntahombaye and Kagabo praise the Buta seminarians for how they *lived* rather than how they died. In this, they uphold Emmanuel Katongole’s theological contention that “while martyrs are honored for the ultimate sacrifice of their lives, the significance of their ‘witness’ directs our attention to everyday forms of living and peaceableness that constitute the shalom of God’s love” ([Katongole 2017](#), p. 252). This is why, he argues, the memory of martyrs “requires the telling and retelling of the thick narrative of their stories, for the power resides in the details of how they lived” (*ibid.*). For Ntahombaye and Kagabo, the power of the Buta martyrdom resides in the details of how they lived like brothers in the years preceding the massacre, as well as in their costly refusal to separate on the day of their death. The seminarians’ witness to living like brothers is important to other Burundians. For Paula Nibigira, mother of martyr Jean-Thierry Arakaza, it ultimately means a willingness to die together. “Though people tried to divide them”, she proclaims, “they were willing to die together—*umuvukano*”.<sup>11</sup> Nibigira’s shift from the French of our discussion to the Kirundi word, *umuvukano*, which may be translated as fraternity (a term quite familiar to her in its French form of *la fraternité*), indicates an appeal to a culturally Burundian understanding of what it means to live like brothers. A gender-inclusive abstract noun, *Umuvukano* is derived from the Kirundi verb to be born (*ku-vuka*), with the suffix *-na* (with, together) suggesting the quality of being born together that describes children of the same parents. This is the term that Bishop Bududira used at the partial lifting of mourning ceremony when he first characterized the Buta seminarians as Martyrs of Fraternity, and it is inscribed on the façade of their sanctuary in the phrase, *Abapfiriye Umuvukano*, or those who died for fraternity. In its familial sense, Adrien Ntabona notes that *Umuvukano* expresses the conviction that “my brother is the one who is born from the same womb as me, who prolongs the same human interiority as me, and with whom I thus identify, with whom I am one” ([Ntabona 2020](#), p. 38). Ultimately, he argues, it signifies “the capacity to give one’s life in the consciousness that one thereby reaches the culminating point of self-realization” (*ibid.*, pp. 39–40). *Umuvukano* also extends beyond the family, Ntabona observes, to encompass “the solidarity of good neighbors, of friendship and even social harmony in general” (*ibid.*, p. 35), all social values the Bashingantahe are called to foster and restore. In its broadest form, *Umuvukano* expresses the aspiration that

"the spirit of family be without borders to render people capable of extending blood ties, of achieving a sense of neighborliness based on familial solidarity, of procuring an unlimited openness to every person and every member of society" (*ibid.*, p. 171). Complementing the largely western concepts of fraternity on which Francis draws in *Fratelli Tutti*, Umuvukano thus broadens and enculturates Francis's claim that "by acknowledging the dignity of each human person, we can contribute to the rebirth of a universal aspiration to fraternity" (*Francis 2020*, §8).<sup>12</sup>

The Buta seminarians' concrete embodiment of this aspiration is all the more remarkable in that it was offered in the midst of a fratricidal war, and in the face of armed assailants determined to divide them. The testimonies quoted in Ntahombaye and Kagabo's volume on the Bashingantahe emphasize the costliness of the seminarians' witness to Umuvukano. The survivors interviewed unanimously credit the fury of their attackers to the students' refusal to separate into Hutus and Tutsis. Fulgence Bizindavyi recalls that when students refused to come out from under their beds after the attackers entered shooting, one of the latter said, "'Be careful, don't kill ours! Hutus on one side, Tutsis on the other side'", and adds that "no single pupil agreed", which caused the attacker to feel ridiculous and shout angrily (*Ntahombaye and Kagabo 2003*, p. 144). Carter Ndayisaba, who was seriously wounded in the attack, confirms that "[a]fter a while they asked those who were still alive to separate themselves into groups. We all refused. They got angry and shot many bullets and hand grenades" (*ibid.*, p. 145). Remembering the order to separate "so that Hutus could stand up on one side", Christophe Ndayikeza cites the seminarians' refusal as "the reason why they killed us indiscriminately" (*ibid.*). Pasteur Manirambona casts the refusal to separate as a stand against betrayal, affirming that, "We refused to betray each other; they got angry and threw a hand grenade which killed many persons" (*ibid.*). The interviewer notes that survivor accounts of the refusal to separate were more than what could be included in the chapter, consistently attributing the massacre of the seminarians to the fact that "they all refused to betray each other by separating themselves according to ethnic groups" (*ibid.*). The same language of betrayal informs the broader conclusions of Ntahombaye and Kagabo about how Bashingantahe responded to the civil war in provinces throughout Burundi. Citing cases in which "some betrayed their responsibility" through fear for their lives, failing to honor the Institution of the Bashingantahe, they also observe that "in some areas the Bashingantahe from all ethnic groups, Hutu and Tutsi, came together and helped to save the situation" (*ibid.*, pp. 150, 149). The Buta seminarians behaved like true Bashingantahe, they assert, because they stayed together and overcame their fear of death to become "heroes of Unity" and "martyrs of love and brotherhood" (*ibid.*, p. 145).

The story of survivor Melchior Ngowenubusa reveals both the depth of the seminarians' commitment to one another, and how powerfully it emerged from a refusal to participate in the fratricidal ideology of the civil war.<sup>13</sup> Ngowenubusa is a Hutu from Bujumbura Rurale, a province that suffered some of the worst violence in the civil war, including repeated attacks on Hutu civilians by the Tutsi-dominated army. Determined to get a good education, he began secondary school in a neighboring province. He was in his second year there when Tutsi survivors of another school massacre arrived and created panic among his Tutsi schoolmates, provoking them to murder their Hutu principal. Ngowenubusa fled back to Bujumbura Rurale, where he struggled to study in the local high school as the war raged around him. A committed Catholic from one of the oldest parishes in the country, he believed that if he obtained a place in a minor seminary, he would find peace. In September of 1996, he began the senior cycle at Buta and was joyfully initiated into a life of prayer, love of country, love of one's neighbor, and love for work. Through cultural and sporting activities, he relates, the seminarians developed the capacity to rely on one another, since when "it's time to organize a cultural evening, everyone participates, and that reinforces love of one's neighbor, because you share in games, in culture, and related knowledge" (Ngowenubusa 2018). But what he had fled in other schools soon found him at Buta. Ngowenubusa was in the senior dormitory when the attack began in April 1997. He recalls praying insistently for unity—that they would die together, Hutus and Tutsis—and

avowing in his heart that he had no rancor against Tutsis. Speaking at a 2023 gathering of survivors and relatives of the Martyrs of Buta, he proclaimed that, “We have suffering, but we also have the joy of having martyrs of whom we can boast to the world. I can come to Buta with assurance because I walked with the Martyrs” (Ngowenubusa 2023).

Though he reserves the term “martyr” for the Buta seminarians who died, Ngowenubusa acknowledges the courage of the survivors who also refused to betray one another under fire. “Those of us who lived demonstrated bravery”, he explains; martyrs “must go to the point of death” (Ngowenubusa 2023). Testifying to the truth, even to the point of death, is one of the primary virtues expected of Bashingantahe. Burundians observe a parallel between the Bashingantahe’s ethical commitment to truth and the Catholic testimony of the Martyrs of Fraternity. Survivor Nicolas Nyabenda cites a proverb asserting that a Mushingantahe prefers to die rather than betray the truth (*umushingantahe aharanira kurangwa ntarahanira kuramba*), likening this commitment to the Christian sense of martyrdom as a testimony to the truth (Nyabenda, letter 2018). Jean-Claude Ndayizeye, who graduated from Buta Seminary a year before the attack and knew many of the martyrs well, served as President of the Tribunal in Bururi Diocese as part of the investigation of the Martyrs of Fraternity by the Congregation for the Causes of Saints. He also invokes the Bashingantahe’s commitment to truth as an ethical precedent for Christian martyrdom, noting that a Mushingantahe is “someone who agrees to speak the truth even if it costs him his life or his fortune”.<sup>14</sup> He adds that among Burundian Catholics, priests are considered to be Bashingantahe, since “one needs to have this human maturity even before having Christian maturity. One supposes that for someone to be a priest, he needs to have the qualities of a Mushingantahe” (Ndayizeye 2020). Philosopher Marie-Goretti Nizigiyimana argues for “an almost immediate relationship between truth and testimony” in her reflections on the Buta martyrdom, explaining that “the reality to which one can render testimony is a truth that encompasses the very person. Someone who knows Jesus Christ with his values and who adheres to Jesus Christ, he can go to the point of blood, he can be led to sacrifice what is most dear to him—his life”.<sup>15</sup> She invokes the spiritual retreat made by the rising Buta seniors two weeks before the attack, “where they were able to return to the values of Christ who came with a universal fraternity”. Citing her own experience at a boarding school near Buta, she recalls how students of the time had a tendency to separate by ethnicity when rumors of violence reached them. In contrast, she says, “the instinct of the children of Buta was to stay together”, demonstrating that “the children were in a framework where they were able to overcome the divisions in which Burundians often find themselves”. Consistently referring to the seminarians as children, she quotes a proverb which asserts that truth is not necessarily spoken by people who are mature in years, but rather by those who know it (*ukuri ntikuvuga uwukuze, kuvuga uwukuzi*). Though the Buta seminarians lacked the maturity in years that characterizes Bashingantahe, she suggests, they were able to testify to the truth of Umuvukano in Christ because they knew it. “The children of Buta”, she concludes, “it’s a gift for Burundi, for this small place of Buta, for the universal Church” (Nizigiyimana 2018).

The association of sacred authority with the Bashingantahe predates the Burundian encounter with Christianity. Adrien Ntabona observes that the Bashingantahe were understood to be mediators of the divine authority of the king and thus sacred figures in themselves, carrying out sacred duties protected by the invisible world (Ntabona 1985, pp. 284–86). He emphasizes that they drew their sacred authority from the people, however, as “the power of the Bashingantahe did not in fact emanate from public authorities, but rather from the local population, directly assisted by the sacred” (ibid., p. 286). The community expressed its approbation through song, dance, speeches, and poetry during the investiture ceremony, which Ntabona likens to “a traditional diploma in humanity, in the deepest sense of the term” (ibid., pp. 279–80). This popular support was indispensable, he argues, for Bashingantahe to be recognized as notable persons, so that their community would henceforth have easy recourse to them as to a parent, seeing in them *umuvyeyi w’igihugu* (a parent of the country) (ibid., p. 281). Though still children at the time of

their death, the Martyrs of Fraternity of Buta are venerated in terms that strongly recall the investiture and popular recognition of the Bashingantahe as parents of the country. Commemorative Masses celebrate them in song, dance, preaching, and speeches, and poetry has been composed in their honor.<sup>16</sup> The local community and pilgrims enjoy easy access to their tombs and sanctuary at Buta, which remain open at all hours to those who come to ask for the Martyrs' intercession. All-night vigils held there twice a month bring hundreds to celebrate the Martyrs' witness to Umuvukano, particularly young people who come to venerate them and learn from their example.

Through these commemorations, the Martyrs of Fraternity exercise the moral and sacred tasks of reconciliation and the restoration of social harmony traditionally invested in Bashingantahe. Salvatore Niciteretse, Bishop of Bururi, observes that Hutus and Tutsis walk and pray together during pilgrimages and commemorative Masses at Buta, claiming that "[t]his is how the blood that was shed is bringing people together. At Buta, we continue to relive fraternity".<sup>17</sup> Niciteretse regards the ultimate source of the Martyrs' ethical testimony as divine, proclaiming that "with the Martyrs of Fraternity at Buta, concretely, we are experiencing situations that are supernatural. What we are seeing happen now at Buta is not propaganda. There was something supernatural, of God, so that these children could stay together. These thousands who come, are they not drawn by something?" (Niciteretse 2020). Those who knew the Buta Martyrs well also insist on the divine origins of their testimony to fraternity. Jean-Claude Ndayizeye emphasizes that "I lived with these young people; I knew them. There was a school context [during the civil war]. In some schools they killed each other; others became mono-ethnic because one group had been destroyed. When we see the fraternity of these young people, it's extraordinary. It's supernatural. People brought machetes—it's too hard! It's a sign that God wanted to make" (Ndayizeye 2020). Teresa Banyakubusa, mother of martyr Alexis Ndikumana, affirms that "the fact of refusing to separate, even to the point of death, it's a gift from God. It goes beyond what we can imagine. They were still children, young. Very few people can go to that place. It's something of God, the spirit of great people, though they were still young".<sup>18</sup> Demonstrating the spirit of great people, the seminarians play the mediating role of Bashingantahe in her account, bringing something of God to the people, though they were still young.

Like Bashingantahe, the seminarians are also venerated as teachers of their people. Venant Bacinoni, late Bishop of Bururi, claimed that the "testimony of the Martyrs of Buta constitutes a permanent lesson for Burundians. It is obviously a tragedy that took place, but a tragedy that is a lesson for us. [...] It is a lesson for humanity".<sup>19</sup> Burundians see this lesson as one that transcends the political sphere, concretely embodying the spirit of Umuvukano for Burundians and all humanity. "Can we believe that politics alone can unite people", asks Marie-Goretti Nizigiyimana, "if there is not this aspect of testimony from someone who lives fraternity, if there is not this leader who incarnates fraternity?" (Nizigiyimana 2018). Survivor Edouard Nkeshimana, who comforted and helped carry wounded classmates to safety during the attack, also observes that political programs had failed to unite Burundi, recalling the Charter of National Unity adopted in 1991, less than three years before the beginning of the civil war. He cites the importance of commemorating the Buta martyrdom in order to overcome this and other political failures to embody fraternity concretely. "Despite politics, we must promote the values of peace and fraternal love", he insists. "We must always commemorate every year to show the country and the whole world that peace is possible through love and fraternity".<sup>20</sup> Savin Sabiraguha, Rector of the Martyrs' Sanctuary from 2016 to 2022, estimates that fifty groups a year now make pilgrimages to Buta, including Catholic and Protestant parishes, schools, religious congregations, youth groups, charismatic movements, and professional organizations.<sup>21</sup> Bishop Niciteretse observes that in commemorating the Martyrs of Fraternity, "these teams or groups are recognizing the nobility of this death. We recognize the value of this death to society, we recognize that good is always good, and in our tradition, we even say that truth will win in the end, and that good will always vanquish evil" (Niciteretse 2020).

Though he celebrates the Buta seminarians as Christian martyrs whose witness embodies something of God, Niciteretse's emphasis on the *nobility* of their death, its *value to society*, and its place in *our tradition* that *truth will win in the end*, also invokes the language of Burundian Ubuntu, particularly as it relates to the Institution of the Bashingantahe. Like Bishop Bududira before him, he asserts that what draws such great numbers of people to the Martyrs of Fraternity is their simultaneous testimony to the fully realized humanity of Burundian Ubuntu and the complete love of one another in Christ. Cherished as children, young people, sons, and those who were still young, the Martyrs of Fraternity emerged as Bashingantahe—elders, sages, and peacemakers—in the crisis of Burundi's civil war, concretely embodying the moral and spiritual truth that all Burundians are sisters and brothers in the larger human family.

#### 4. Ibanga: The Ethics of Sacrificial Solidarity

Bashingantahe are regarded as keepers of the fundamental values that have contributed to the building of Burundi as a nation ([Ntabonye 1999](#), p. 1). In particular, they are closely associated with the national virtue of Ibanga, considered to be the foundation of traditional Burundian society and subsequently adopted to express Christian faith. Adrien Ntabona defines Ibanga as “the cult of the interior life”, which anchors the capacity of all sacrifice, including the sacrifice of one’s life, “in the intimate interiority of the person” ([Ntabona 1993](#), pp. 31, 34). The Ibanga of a Mushingantahe in particular uniquely conveys “a profound sense of sacrifice”, he relates, “a courageous acceptance of the constraints tied to his original commitment, which is to say, the commitment of giving his life to the cause of humanity” ([Ntabona 1985](#), p. 289). Ntabona observes that vocabulary derived from Ibanga is constantly on the lips of mature Burundians, and places it at the base of the country’s framework of sacred values ([Ntabona 1993](#), p. 10). In his series on Burundian Ubuntu, he further characterizes Ibanga as the anchor and summit of Burundian humanism, and promotes it as a national value that can enrich the world ([Ntabona 2020](#), pp. 25–28). The Burundian authors of a UNESCO manual on national cultural values affirm that the cohesion of Burundian society rests on the value of Ibanga, which signifies on the one hand, fidelity, and on the other, a secret, as in the expression *kugumya ibanga*, which implies both keeping a secret and keeping faith ([UNESCO 2017](#), pp. 88, 85). Ntabona gives priority to a faithful relationship in treating this dual sense of Ibanga, describing it as “the radical fidelity to the constitutive ties of the person (a secret one carries, a commitment undertaken or duty assumed) to the point of conferring on the person an interior force equal to any ordeal ([Ntabona 1985](#), p. 287)”. Acknowledging the traditional association of Ibanga with warrior culture and the violent defense of a just cause, he argues that active non-violence must now be privileged, though accepting death in the peaceful defense of a just cause must remain de rigueur, however costly ([Ntabona 2020](#), p. 20). Ntabona ultimately concludes that Ibanga represents fidelity to the ideal version of oneself, propelled forward and rendered communal in the company of those who share the same life project and who cultivate among themselves “a shared community-self” for which one is ready to undergo sacrifice ([Ntabona 2020](#), p. 26).

There is another side, however, to the traditional understanding and practice of Ibanga. In its association with secrets and loyalty, the cultural imperative of Ibanga can be used to enforce a silence of unquestioning obedience. Venant Bacinoni, late Bishop of Bururi Diocese, observed of Burundian society that, “we are too discrete, too silent. [...] We are in a society that does not favor openness or expression, and everyone is afraid of everyone else. [...] It’s a society obligated to keep silence. [...] This is not the effect of any one regime. It’s the effect of a longstanding mode of governance, even under the kings” (Bacinoni 2018). In *Politics and Violence in Burundi: The Language of Truth in an Emerging State*, historian Aidan Russell traces how the language of Ibanga was co-opted by governing elites in the first decade of independence (1962–1972). He documents an early instance of this political appropriation in a 1964 speech by Pierre Mpozenzi, the Deputy Prime Minister, who addressed the Burundian people as *Bagumyabanga* (my emphasis), which Russell

glosses as “those who keep a secret” (Ibanga), or the “discrete” and “loyal” ones ([Russell 2019](#), p. 142). Citizens of the nation state were thus encouraged to demonstrate their loyalty through discretion, he suggests. “As the bond of a nation”, he elaborates, Ibanga was “the heart of true political obligation” (*ibid.*) and “all politics, both good and evil, was built on the strength and solidarity of sharing and protecting a hidden truth that compelled its bearers” (*ibid.*, p. 143). Drawing on interviews and archival records, Russell demonstrates that local political actors in the early years of independence retained a more reciprocal sense of Ibanga, in which the “duty that bound a citizen to the state also bound the state to the citizen”, so that Ibanga was “not simply something held in obligation to an abstract office, but an unbreakable bond between individuals (*ibid.*, p. 176)”. The ethical breadth of Ibanga, however, quickly narrowed in the national political sphere, from its traditional sense of fulfilling one’s social obligation to the whole community, to the silent and unquestioning obedience of what Russell terms “secret-keepers loyal to the state” (*ibid.*, p. 150).

Russell notes that the term Bagumyabanga with which the Deputy Prime Minister addressed the Burundian people in 1964 has since been adopted by the CNDD-FDD party, which refers to its members as Bagumyabanga—those who keep the secret, or perhaps, those who firmly obey and perform their duty. This title is inscribed on party headquarters at the local and national level, and on the many small monuments erected in urban neighborhoods and the countryside by the party’s rank and file. Political scientist René Lemarchand argues that the term Bagumyabanga ascribes heroic virtues to CNDD-FDD members who are loyal to the party and its president, and was associated in particular with the aura of near-sanctity cultivated by the late President Pierre Nkurunziza during his time in office (2005–2020) ([Lemarchand 2021](#), p. 72). After the CNDD-FDD attacked Buta Minor Seminary in 1997, they falsely claimed that the school was serving as an arms depot and training ground for Tutsi militias. The party has never retracted the story broadcast the day after the attack by its official spokesperson on Voice of America Radio, which asserts that its forces were passing peacefully through the region when fired upon by a teacher at the seminary.<sup>22</sup> To this day, party members will not speak of the massacre, nor have high-ranking CNDD-FDD officials visited the Sanctuary of the Martyrs of Fraternity, now a major pilgrimage site whose commemorative Masses have drawn as many as five thousand worshippers.<sup>23</sup> Nicolas Nyabenda, who was directly targeted by those seeking to separate the seminarians into Hutus and Tutsis and who sustained serious injuries during the attack, relates that friends who are members of the CNDD-FDD refuse to discuss the Buta attack with him (Nyabenda, discussion 2018). Nepo Bironkwa, also wounded during the attack, similarly testifies to the party’s silence, which he encountered during two terms as president of the peacebuilding organization founded by the survivors. “The authors of this massacre are in power today”, he relates, “but when we say that [our organization] was born from the survivors of Buta, they are silent. They do no good for us, but they do us no harm”.<sup>24</sup>

An oppressive version of Ibanga, then, seems to be at work among Bagumyabanga with regard to the Buta massacre, enforcing silence about the attack and precluding discussion of its real motives. This version of Ibanga is not limited to the CNDD-FDD party, however, nor did the CNDD-FDD invent it.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, the political manipulation of Ibanga corresponds to a broader pattern of cultural appropriation by governing elites in post-independence Africa. In *The Sacrifice of Africa: A Political Theology for Africa*, Emmanuel Katongole describes this phenomenon as “the unhitching of an African virtue—*harambee*, *ujamia*, or *ubuntu*—from its context and historical way of life, bounded by mutual obligations and fellow feeling, and deploying it in the service of the self-interested politics of the modern African state” ([Katongole 2011](#), p. 56). By the time of the Buta massacre in 1997, successive political regimes and movements had appropriated the sacrificial ethics of Ibanga in precisely these terms, exploiting the sacred bond it ideally represents at the heart of a society where everyone bears personal responsibility. In these distorted political versions, the invitation to participate in a shared ethics of sacrificial solidarity is replaced

by a burden of unquestioning loyalty whose tendency is to crush people into silence rather than to affirm the worth and dignity of the human person.

The political distortion of Ibanga in postcolonial Burundi participates in the denial, exploitation, and sacrificing of Africa that Katongole argues “is hard-wired into the imaginative landscape of modern Africa” ([Katongole 2011](#), p. 22). Indeed, he has observed that “Burundi and its violent history of ethnic hatred highlight various aspects of the performance of the founding story of Africa’s modernity”, including “tribalism, violence, poverty, desperation, the lies of identity, and the wastage and sacrificing of Africa” ([Katongole 2011](#), p. 24). A new future in Africa, he argues, “requires much more than strategies and skills to solve the problems of nation-state politics” (*ibid.*, p. 21). It calls for a new paradigm of social ethics in Africa, focused “more on stories than on skills” (*ibid.*). Christianity, he suggests, “is very well suited to engage the task of social imagination in Africa, given its founding narrative that is reenacted and remembered through the disciplines of community, memory, and lament” (*ibid.*, p. 22), and in the centrality to its narrative of “a story of self-sacrificing love that involves a different notion of power and thus gives rise to new patterns of life” (*ibid.*, p. 20). In the following sections, I explore how the story of the Martyrs of Fraternity of Buta revives and redeems a long process of grafting the national virtue of Ibanga to the central Christian story of self-sacrificing love. I also consider how contemporary Burundians remember and reenact the Martyrs’ witness through the disciplines of community, memory, and lament, thus exploring “the range of imaginative possibilities of Christian social existence in Africa” that Katongole calls for ([Katongole 2011](#), p. 21).

## 5. Reviving Ibanga: The Sanctification of a National Virtue

Early Burundian converts and missionaries adopted the sacrificial ethics of Ibanga as a vehicle for enculturated Christian faith. Adrien Ntabona observes that the term Ibanga “soon conveyed the notion of faith (*ibanga ry ubukristu*) insofar as the latter was all-encompassing” ([Ntabona 1993](#), p. 10). The language and ethics of Ibanga are recurrent elements in discussions of the Buta Martyrs I have had with a wide range of Burundian Catholics, including women and men, lay people, religious and ordained church personnel, farmers, soldiers, educators, physicians, journalists, scholars, and others. Anthropologist Léonidas Nitereka, Vicar General of Bururi Diocese and a former Rector of Buta Minor Seminary, understands the Buta martyrdom as a Christian testimony to solidarity and dialogue among all people. “Martyrdom is the affirmation of relationship”, he explains. “When the children of Buta say, ‘No, we will not separate, we are a single family in Jesus Christ,’ they transmitted a message, even to the executioners. They affirm a fundamental relationship that is in all people: I have a message; I am in dialogue with others”.<sup>26</sup> Though he reserves the term martyrdom for Christian witness, Nitereka identifies Ibanga as a heroic virtue that could be considered a moral precursor to Christian martyrdom in Burundian culture. Citing a proverb that may be loosely translated as “Ibanga is won by carrying a burden” (*Ibanga ribangirwa ingata*), he frames the virtue in terms of a willingness to sacrifice oneself for the sake of society and the fulfillment of one’s own full humanity. “It’s the idea of sacrifice to attain the status of a worthy person, a person of honor”, he explains. “If you are a worthy person, well then, you agree to carry some weight. Dignity is won by carrying responsibilities. . . . You have a role in society and so you play your role to the very end” ([Nitereka 2018](#)).

Adrien Ntabona also uses the phrase “to the very end” to ascribe the fortitude and willing self-sacrifice of Ibanga to the Buta Martyrs, asserting that “they prepared themselves together to testify to the very end to the value of Christian fraternity” (Adrien Ntabona, letter to author, 22 November 2018). Invoking the worth traditionally attached to such testimony, he observes that even if one dies for the all-encompassing commitment of Ibanga, one’s life is prolonged by having left a good testimony, or *gusiga umugani mwiza* in Kirundi ([Ntabona 1993](#), p. 35). Teresa Banyakubusa uses this expression in speaking of her son, Alexis Ndikumana, who was killed during the attack on Buta. She takes joy in the fact that “Alexis has left a good testimony [*yarasize umugani mwiza*]”, a good action she extends to all

the Buta Martyrs in claiming that “these children died for fraternity [Umuvukano], for the love of God—*they left this testimony* to love and fraternity [Umuvukano]” (my emphasis) (Banyakubusa 2020). Emmanuel Mbonyingingo, who interpreted during my discussion with Banyakubusa, explains that *gusiga umugani mwiza* is typically used in reference to those who, though they died without issue, will be remembered for their good deeds and words.<sup>27</sup> In place of children, then, Alexis and the other Buta Martyrs have left their testimony, transcending the honor and dignity of biological paternity to become spiritual parents who exemplify love of God and Umuvukano. This understanding of Christian testimony and its spiritual rewards is strikingly similar to the promise Origen extends to early Christian martyrs who go willingly to their death in *Exhortation to Martyrdom*, where he affirms that, instead of “leav[ing] behind children with lands and houses”, martyrs inspire others to embrace Christianity, becoming “the father of a hundred-fold and holier children”, even “fathers of the fathers, the patriarch Abraham and the other patriarchs” (Origen 1979, pp. 51–2). Burundians thus share with the early Church the conviction that sacrifice hallows human relationships, transcending the biological family to anchor and edify a lasting spiritual community.

Ibanga’s traditional senses of interiority and intimate silence also figure in Burundian discussions of the Buta seminarians’ sacrifice. Survivor Edouard Nkeshimana served for several years as a priest in the Pastoral Center next to the Sanctuary of the Martyrs of Fraternity, passing daily by their tombs. He relates that he might read a name on one of the crosses surmounting the tombs and hear a religious song or hymn they used to sing together. Talking about the attack brings back the smell of gun smoke, the grenade, and the blood of his schoolmates. “Within us there lives a message that we cannot translate”, he says. “What we lived through far exceeds what we are able to say” (Nkeshimana 2018). Pasteur Manirambona, who helped Nkeshimana carry a wounded classmate to safety, also finds himself at a loss for words at times. “Buta goes beyond me”, he says. “Sometimes, I prefer not to talk about it so as not to give a message that doesn’t correspond” (Manirambona 2019). Nicolas Nyabenda, who was in a coma for two weeks after the attack, describes martyrdom as “a way of bringing out Christ, this hidden God, to show Him to the world” (Nyabenda, letter 2018).<sup>28</sup> In considering Burundian cultural antecedents of Christian martyrdom, he cites the expression “to die for Ibanga” (*gupfira ibanga*), which he glosses as the bravura and courage of someone who accepts a violent death in the cause of truth (ibid.). Pierre Nyandwi, father of martyr Désiré Nduwimana, associates this truth with the sacrament of baptism, defining martyrdom as faith in the charge or duty (Ibanga) one receives at baptism (“ni uwkwemera *ibanga* wayaronse ya batisimo”) (my emphasis).<sup>29</sup> These testimonies from survivors and parents of martyrs restore Ibanga’s traditional senses of sacrificial commitment and interiority, reclaiming it from political distortions, and affirming its Christian association with the sacrament of baptism and an anchored faith for which one is willing to sacrifice one’s life. Expressing an enculturated Catholic ethics rooted in an all-encompassing faith, a profound sense of sacrifice, and the commitment of giving one’s life to the cause of humanity, the witness of the Martyrs of Fraternity redeems and hallows the national virtue of Ibanga.

## 6. Reimagining Christian Social Existence after War

Francis has identified the family and school as privileged milieux for teaching the values of love and fraternity (Francis 2020, §114). The testimony of the Buta Martyrs is anchored in a Burundian ethics of sacrificial solidarity they would have learned in their families and at the seminary. Yet their parents, teachers, and priests universally acknowledge how the boys went beyond them in their sacrificial witness. True Bashingantahe imbued with the inner strength and devotion of Ibanga, the children of Buta have become parents, teachers, and priests to their families and nation. In discussing the seminarians’ testimony, Burundians emphasize how their example of sacrificial solidarity inspires and strengthens their Christian social existence. Jean-Marie Nduwamungu, a priest in a neighboring diocese, visits Buta to pray with three martyrs who were born in his home parish. He recounts how

their martyrdom anchors his own inner struggles. "In this country where forgiveness is difficult, where dialogue is difficult, when I come here, it reminds me of what I must do", he explains. The Buta seminarians' testimony "teaches me to forgive in my own occasional martyrdom. When someone attacks me verbally, how am I going to handle myself? They have already helped me in many situations when I invoked them. They help me to reinforce my priestly vocation in moments of crisis".<sup>30</sup> Languide Baragahorana, who lives in the neighboring town of Bururi, notes that after the assassination of President Ndadaye in 1993, Burundians said they could not live together if they were not of the same ethnic group. "But the Martyrs of Buta showed us the opposite", she asserts, "that ethnicism has no value, that we want to be and to remain brothers, even if we're not of the same ethnicity. It is possible to remain united and be brothers".<sup>31</sup> Baragahorana was so inspired by the witness of the Martyrs of Fraternity that she enrolled her son at Buta Minor Seminary in September 1997, only months after the attack. "We were proud to send our children to the seminary", she explains, "because we saw that over there, they were teaching fraternity, they were teaching love" (Baragahorana 2020). Bishop Niciteretse affirms that at Buta, following the example of the Martyrs, "we continue to relive fraternity. It's a death which is good, which is incarnated, so that commemoration becomes an incarnation of the values that were lived" (Niciteretse 2020). As a theologian of the social teachings of the church, he argues that "solidarity cannot remain at the level of individuals", but must be "exercised at the level of groups and nations" (Niciteretse 2003, p. 282). "It's not the killers of Buta who saved Burundi", he proclaims, "but it's the seminarians who are helping us to live fraternity. The blood of the innocents can never be lost [...] this blood that was poured out brings people together" (Niciteretse 2020).

Longtime Buta resident Jacqueline Ntakirutimana testifies to the impact of the seminarians' witness on the inner life of the faithful who pray at the Martyrs' sanctuary. "If we commemorate these martyrs", she asserts, "we interiorize in people this fraternity between people. We interiorize it so that we follow the model of these martyrs".<sup>32</sup> Through this intimate interiority, she adds, the Martyrs bring people into conversation with God, noting that a common devotional practice at the sanctuary is to call on a particular martyr. "You can take a martyr that you want", she explains, "and then you go through this martyr so that he makes you—what can I say—he makes you talk to God". She reports that many have been healed after praying at the Martyrs' tombs, including a traumatized woman who had suffered from mental illness for years. On the day of the attack, Jacqueline and her family were hiding in the toilets behind their home when they saw Oscar Nzisabira, a seminarian in the junior cycle, approaching. They were preparing to take refuge in the seminary, but Oscar told them not to go there because everyone had been killed. Jacqueline and her husband shared some clothes with the boy, who was wearing nothing but underwear and a T-shirt and shivered with cold. They tried to persuade him to flee into the hills with them, but he said he had already been shot and preferred to die inside. Jacqueline believes her family would have been killed had they gone to the seminary as planned. "So, this child, he was our martyr", she explains. "Unfortunately, he died in the house where we were living. Always, if there's something that's hard for me, I say to him, 'Child Oscar, you must take care of us.'"

In the intimacy of prayer, Burundians appeal to the Martyrs of Fraternity to intercede for them in matters great and small. Gaspard Nzeyimana reports that he calls on his son, martyr Pacifique Kanezere, whenever he needs anything. A Buta native, Nzeyimana often visits the tombs at the Martyrs' Sanctuary. "I go all the time to greet my sons", he reports. "I say hello to them. I say Hail Mary".<sup>33</sup> He says that he knows his son and all the seminarians who were killed for staying together are martyrs, insisting that "whether the Pope accords it or not, they're true martyrs. I'm a dirty sinner, but I know that they're martyrs—in my Catholic faith, I know it" (Nzeyimana 2018). The family of martyr Patrick Nininahazwe also bring their needs to him in prayer. One of his sisters, finding herself pregnant outside marriage, greatly feared the impact of this revelation on a family where everyone gets along well. "My brother, here is the situation in which I've found myself when fraternal love and

good understanding reign in my family”, she recalls praying. “Help me, if I announce my health situation, so that there won’t be discord because of me” ([Nkeshimana 2020](#), p. 42). After praying a novena, she found the courage to reveal her pregnancy. “The members of my family welcomed me warmly and without hard feelings”, she reports, and “each one on their side, according to what they could do, has helped me to this day” (*ibid.*) Her father, Sébastien Rizi, a retired teacher who often serves as the spokesperson for the Martyrs’ parents, relates how praying to his son, martyr Patrick Niniyahazwe, has healed his own trauma and made it possible for his wife to participate in commemorations of the Martyrs of Fraternity, which was initially difficult for her.<sup>34</sup> Barnabé Bizindavyi, a staff member present in the dormitory on the day of the massacre, encourages parents and other relatives to ask the Martyrs of Fraternity to intercede for their trauma healing, describing the Martyrs as holy and asserting that “the gift of the Martyrs honors the parents, the diocese, the Minor Seminary; it’s a testimony to Catholic action and education in the country”.<sup>35</sup>

Through their example and their intercession, the Martyrs of Fraternity of Buta strengthen and restore families, the Church, the nation, and the hearts of the faithful. Their witness inspires Burundian Catholics to cultivate the intimate interiority of Ibanga, anchoring an ethics of sacrificial solidarity in a country where forgiveness and dialogue have become difficult. In this, they redeem and sanctify a virtue that has contributed to the building of Burundi as a nation, showing Burundians a way out of the deep identity crisis that the people and their values have suffered. The self-sacrificing love of their witness to Umuvukano also inspires Burundians to explore new imaginative possibilities of Christian social existence in Africa, pointing to a future that, in Katongole’s terms, confronts and interrupts the wanton sacrificing of African lives with “a different story and its accompanying practices in which the sacredness, the preciousness, the inviolability, and the dignity of African lives are foregrounded” ([Katongole 2011](#), p. 18).

## 7. Conclusions

During the prolonged crisis of Burundi’s interethnic civil war, the Martyrs of Fraternity of Buta bore witness to the truth that they were not primarily Hutus or Tutsis, but rather, children of God and members of the larger human family. When Francis affirms the value to the human family of a country that remains grounded in its original cultural substratum, he adds that “[w]e need to develop the awareness that nowadays we are either all saved together or no one is saved” ([Francis 2020](#), §137). The Martyrs of Fraternity of Buta knew the truth that we are all saved together and embodied it by staying and dying together in the moment of their ordeal. Young as they were, they redeemed the treasures of Burundian Ubuntu from the distortions of political manipulation, reviving an ethics of sacrificial solidarity and devotion in a time of national chaos and despair. Sanctifying national virtue with their blood, they concretely embodied the conviction that all human beings are brothers and sisters. Their sacrificial solidarity makes it possible to imagine the broader fraternity among peoples and nations that Francis calls for in *Fratelli Tutti*. Holy innocents of Africa’s violent history, the children of Buta are also, in Katongole’s terms, living witnesses of what hope looks like in the contexts of violence and war that are increasingly our shared realities. Their costly witness, together with the testimony of those who venerate them in Burundi, contributes to the African church’s witness of hope, reinvigorating and rekindling the global Church’s mission as a sacrament of peace in the world. Told and retold by Burundians, the thick narrative of their story helps the Church to reimagine Catholic ethics as truly dialogic, recasting concepts of sacrifice and solidarity in terms of African values and African lives. At the same time, this dialogic narrative sanctifies and redeems African institutions and virtues distorted by the modern African state as it participates in new forms of globalized exploitation and appropriation. Redeeming a tragic incident of violence in a fratricidal war, the Martyrs of Fraternity and the Burundians who tell their story mediate the experience of abundant life by Africans that Aihiokhai calls for, looking within to the riches of their own traditions and faith to find Christ, who is Truth. This Burundian witness to an ethics of sacrificial solidarity, solidly grounded in its

original cultural substratum, stands as a resource for a world increasingly engulfed in war, refusing categorically to let violence have the last word in a story of fraternal love hallowed by sacrifice.

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## Notes

- 1 The most recent national census data indicate that over 61% of Burundians are practising Catholics, more than double any other religious affiliation in the country ([Bureau Central du Recensement du Burundi 2008](#), pp. 56–67).
- 2 Benedict XVI, *Africae Munus*, 9. Noting that “Africa’s memory is painfully scarred as a result of fratricidal conflicts between ethnic groups, the slave trade and colonization”, Benedict affirms that he also sees “grounds for hope in Africa’s rich intellectual, cultural and religious heritage. Africa wishes to preserve this, to deepen it and to share it with the world. By doing so, it will make an important and positive contribution”. Benedict also calls on the African church “to recognize among servants of the Gospel in Africa those who could be canonized according to the norms of the Church” (*Africae Munus*, 114).
- 3 John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Africa*, 48. John Paul here quotes from his 1989 sermon to the Malawian Bishops, in which he urged African Catholics “to look inside yourselves. Look to the riches of your own traditions, look to the faith which we are celebrating in this assembly. Here you will find genuine freedom—here you will find Christ who will lead you to the truth”.
- 4 Nicolas Nyabenda (priest and professor of philosophy and a survivor) in discussion with the author, Bujumbura, Burundi, October 2018. Nyabenda notes that recruiting students who could serve as officers may have been a motive in attacking Buta also.
- 5 Zacharie Bukuru, personal communication to the author, February 2024. Bukuru adds that *gutandukana* can also be used in the context of breaking up a fight; i.e., getting between the fighters to separate them and end the fight.
- 6 For further discussion of this culture of peace, based on survivor and teacher interviews as well as Bukuru’s important narrative, see ([Mikalachki 2021](#)). Drawing on Bukuru’s book and an interview with him, Katongole also emphasizes the seminarians’ ethical preparation to make their witness to fraternal love ([Katongole 2017](#), pp. 256–58).
- 7 Pasteur Manirambona (priest, survivor of the senior dormitory, and brother of martyr Patrick Nininahazwe) in discussion with the author, Bujumbura, Burundi, September 2019.
- 8 The original French of Bududira’s letter describes the seminarians as models of *humanité accomplie* and *amour total* ([Bududira 2002](#)). Anthropologist and linguist Adrien Ntabona translates Ubuntu as *humanité réussie* in his series of volumes exploring Burundian Ubuntu. Philosopher and poet Michel Kayoya translates Ubuntu as *humanisme élevé* ([Kayoya 2007](#), p. 16). In my essay, I use the phrase “fully realized humanity” to translate *humanité accomplie* and *humanité réussie* as they refer to Ubuntu. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from French or Kirundi are my own.
- 9 Manirambona also recalls hearing dying students say, “Forgive them, Father, for they know not what they do” (Manirambona 2019). Zacharie Bukuru records other survivor accounts of hearing those who died speaking these words of Christ on the cross, along with prayers for their assassins, the peace of their country, and their brothers ([Bukuru 2015](#), p. 86).
- 10 Louis Niyongabo also discusses the Institution of the Bashingantahe in relation to the Buta seminarians’ testimony ([Niyongabo 2018](#), pp. 85–92).
- 11 Paula Nibigira (retired secretary and mother of martyr Jean-Thierry Arakaza) in discussion with the author, May 2020.
- 12 For further discussion of Umuvukano, see ([Mikalachki 2021](#), pp. 18–23, and [Mikalachki 2023b](#)).
- 13 Material in this paragraph is drawn from the author’s discussions with Melchior Ngowenubusa (physician, survivor of the senior dormitory, and vice president of ALM-Buta survivors’ association) in Bujumbura, Burundi in October 2018 and in Buta, Burundi in October 2023.
- 14 Jean-Claude Ndayizeye (Buta alumnus, priest, and President of the 2019 Tribunal for the Beatification of the Martyrs of Fraternity of Burundi in Bururi Diocese) in discussion with the author, Bururi, Burundi, May 2020.
- 15 Marie-Goretti Nizigiyimana (philosopher, religious sister, and former Secretary General of the National Office of Catholic Education in Burundi) in discussion with the author, Burasira, Burundi, September 2018.
- 16 For poetry and prayers in French and Kirundi composed in honor of the Martyrs of Fraternity of Buta, see (Louis [Niyongabo 2018](#), pp. 141–46, and [Nkeshimana 2020](#), pp. 4–5, 17, 49).

- 17 Salvatore Niciteretse (Bishop of Bururi Diocese) in discussion with the author, Bururi, Burundi, May 2020.
- 18 Teresa Banyakubusa (farmer and mother of martyr Alexis Ndikumana) in discussion with the author, Mugozi, Burundi, May 2020.
- 19 Venant Bacinoni (late Bishop of Bururi Diocese) in discussion with the author, Bururi, Burundi, October 2018.
- 20 Edouard Nkeshimana (priest and survivor of the senior dormitory) in discussion with the author, Buta, Burundi, May 2018.
- 21 Savin Sabiraguha (Rector of the Martyrs of Fraternity Sanctuary at Buta, 2012–2016) in discussion with the author, Bujumbura, Burundi, November 2022.
- 22 This story was also reported in several European news outlets sympathetic to Hutu political and armed movements during the civil war ([Bukuru 2015](#), pp. 111–14).
- 23 High-ranking CNDD-FDD party members, many of whom are Catholic, typically attend diocesan ordinations, episcopal consecrations, and other major ceremonies organized by the Catholic Church in Burundi.
- 24 Jean Nepomucène Bironkwa (journalist, survivor, and past president of the survivors' association) in discussion with the author, Bujumbura, Burundi, March 2018. For more on the Buta survivors' association and the politics of commemorating the Martyrs of Fraternity, see ([Mikalachki 2021](#), pp. 29–32).
- 25 Pierre Mpozenzi, the Vice Prime Minister who used the term Bagumyabanga to address the people of Burundi in 1964, was a member of Uprona, the principal party against which the CNDD-FDD fought during the civil war.
- 26 Léonidas Nitereka (Vicar General of Bururi Diocese and former Rector of Buta Minor Seminary) in discussion with the author, Buta, Burundi, October 2018.
- 27 Emmanuel Mbonyingingo (Benedictine Monk, Mary Queen of Peace Monastery at Buta) in discussion with the author, Buta, Burundi, January 2023.
- 28 For a theological discussion of Nyabenda's allusion to Paul's image of the new life as "hidden with Christ in God" (Colossians 3:3), see ([Mikalachki 2023a](#)).
- 29 Pierre Nyandwi (retired soldier and father of martyr Désiré Nduwimana) in conversation with the author, Ndava, Burundi, December 2019.
- 30 Jean-Marie Nduwamungu (priest and pilgrim to Buta Martyrs' Sanctuary) in discussion with the author, Buta, Burundi, May 2020.
- 31 Languide Baragahorana (retired nurse and mother of Buta graduate) in discussion with the author, Bururi, Burundi, May 2020.
- 32 Jacqueline Ntakirutimana (Buta Seminary teacher and bookkeeper) in discussion with the author, Buta, Burundi, December 2019.
- 33 Gaspard Nzeyimana (retired veterinarian and father of martyr Pacifique Kanezere) in discussion with the author, Buta, Burundi, May 2018.
- 34 Sébastien Rizi (retired teacher, father of martyr Patrick Nininahazwe, and spokesman for relatives of the Martyrs of Fraternity) in discussion with survivors and relatives of the Martyrs of Fraternity, Buta, Burundi, April 2023.
- 35 Barnabé Bizindavyi (Secretary of Buta Minor Seminar and resident student supervisor at the time of the attack) in discussion with survivors and relatives of the Martyrs of Fraternity, Buta, Burundi, October 2023.

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