

## Ruhiza Boroto

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## From the shores of the Great Lakes: selections from an autobiography

1  
On Monday 23 July 1962, in the late hours of the morning, a young woman, 25 years old, mother of four children and in advanced stage of another pregnancy took along her stepdaughter, Noella, to look for some wood near the plantation of *quinquina* in Nyanja. With no water and electricity in the village, it was the responsibility of women to collect these essential commodities for the needs of their families. Quinquina is a plant that is used to make quinine, a medicine against malaria. Quinquina was grown in the mountainous areas surrounding Bukavu, the capital of the Province of South Kivu, in the Congo. Nyanja is a village in the territory of Walungu, Province of South Kivu that had a large farm of tea and quinquina owned by Pharmakina, a company with several other plantations in the area. Nyanja is part of a bigger settlement known as Nduba. The pregnant woman came from a neighbouring village, Kalole. Her family lived in Bukavu but she always returned to her husband's village during school holidays, especially during the long holidays of July and August.

As she was busy gathering her wood, the baby inside her started to kick, asking impatiently to get out to discover what was out there. She walked to the house of the white farmer in the plantation, to ask for a lift to the hospital of Walungu, some 8 kilometers away. The farmer asked her to wait. But the baby could not wait any longer; it was fast breaking the gates of the world. And so, the woman ran quickly in the woods nearby and delivered her baby on her own. It was a baby boy. She returned to the farmer's house holding her baby in her hands. The farmer then took them to the hospital.

At the time when this was happening, the father of the child was away, in Europe, on a training course as an educationist. He worked for the Ministry of Education and had been sent to Belgium and France for a few months. Upon receiving the news, he shared it with his friends there. It was his prerogative, as the head of the family, to give a name to this child of his. So, on a congratulation postcard to the mother of the child, he wrote that the name of the child would be Ruhizatinyi Louis Baudouin Victor Célestin Jean de Dieu. This long list of names was a result of his many friends who each requested that the child bear theirs. And so he decided to accommodate all of them. Except for Ruhizatinyi, the rest of the names were Western names. That child

was me. We were many children and lived with two mothers. My mother was, Ma Muloko, meaning younger mother as she was called. The other mother was Ma Mukubwa, meaning elder mother.

2

My mother later told me of an adventure of hers during those years. I was probably two or three, I do not know. We lived in a house at the school called Athenée d'Ibanda Bukavu, on the shores of Lake Kivu. She begged my father for days, asking him to let her go to visit her family. She wanted to see her younger sister and persuade her not to get married to a man who was already married. Was it because of her own experience as a second wife that she was opposed to her sister's plans? She was never given permission to go. She was from Birava, a village that was 30 km north of Bukavu, in the opposite direction to Kalole. She decided to disobey her husband.

One morning, she waited for him to go to work to sneak out of the house. She planned to be back before 2:00 pm when he would return from work. She would go to the stop and get on a pick-up vehicle, the common mode of transport from Bukavu to the countryside. She soon got on one and they drove off. However, on two occasions, they had a breakdown on the way to Birava and every time, the driver and his assistant had to open the bonnet and fix the car. Each time, they succeeded in getting the car to start again.

Then, as they were approaching a bridge, the driver saw another vehicle coming from the opposite direction. He either had to crash into the coming car or drive into the river. In his efforts to avoid either alternative, he lost control of the car and ended up driving into the embankment on the side of the road. My mother was not harmed, but she got a real fright: "Isn't all this happening because I am on this trip without my husband's approval?"

She decided to end her journey there and took the next pick-up heading back towards Bukavu. As she was getting closer to home, she bought a piece sugar cane for chewing to appear as casual as possible; she wanted to create the impression that she had not gone far from home. Nobody suspected where she had been. And she spoke to no one about the incident. She succeeded in keeping her secret to herself.

A few weeks later, however, my father came to her and asked her to tell him about the accident. If she had been white, she would have blushed. How did he know about what had happened? He told her that a man from his village who worked in a farm near the scene of the accident had actually seen her come out of that pick-up and take another one back to Bukavu. So when, a few weeks later, this man met my father. It was only normal for him to enquire about my mother's condition.

She was very embarrassed and apologetic. She was forced to confess that she had decided to go on her own because he would not grant her permission.

He admonished her. "How could you expect me to receive news of an accident when you left without informing me? How could you disobey me? Is this how a husband and wife are supposed to live?"

3

One day, my family moved from that first house of my childhood memories. A car carried us to another house in Tshimpunda, Kadutu. I remember little from those days in that new house in Tshimpunda, except that one day we had to run away from a rebellion started by a mercenary, Jean Schramme. The year was 1967. This was a common happening during those days after independence, in 1960, when mercenaries were hired by whoever wanted to proclaim a fiefdom for himself and claim a parcel of power. In 1964, during the Mulele rebellion, similar troubles had erupted in Bukavu and the sound of machine guns could be heard frequently. We were trapped in Bukavu and could not seek refuge anywhere.

I am told that as a toddler learning to speak, I used to imitate the sound of those machine guns by saying: *Mulele afanya hivi – Apili pili apolo polo* meaning "Mulele does like this – *Apili pili apolo polo*."

My mother told me that during the Mulele rebellion, we once ran out of food. She decided to visit her mother's sister to ask for some. To her disappointment, the aunt refused to help her, saying that she did not have enough for her own family. My father would sometime go out with his Beetle to look for food and the children would be waiting for him impatiently as they were hungry. As they stood listening to the sound of any car that was approaching, they would shout with excitement *Baba!* "Daddy!" However, as the car moved closer and changed gears and the sound of the engine changed accordingly, they would realise that it was not his car and would say with disappointment and discouragement, *Haiko Baba ...*, "it is not Daddy ..."

This time, in 1967, probably with the fresh memories of the events of 1964 and the associated hardships, the roads to the villages were crowded with people walking away from the war and carrying on their heads, shoulders or backs the belongings that they could manage to take. It is not impossible that some people regretted already the sudden independence of the Congo with all these rebellions that were erupting year after year. The political stability that followed Mobutu's seizure of power in 1965 came as a welcome relief.

As we fled Bukavu, someone carried me on his shoulders and we walked towards our village, Kalole, to seek refuge. I simply recall going up the hills that surround Bukavu on the pedestrian path to the village. Bukavu is located in a valley at the southern end of Lake Kivu; the surrounding villages are all in the upper hills. Only those villages in the southeast direction, along the valley of the Ruzizi River were relatively flatter. The Ruzizi River drains the Lake Kivu into Lake Tanganyika, the

second deepest freshwater lake in the world, after Lake Baikal. Was it my brother Oscar that carried me, I do not remember? Soon, it got dark and from somewhere, my father appeared driving a Jeep and looking for us. We were, however, too many to fit in the car. So, he took a few of us and we drove to our home in the village of Kalole. The others followed on their feet. Although I had been on someone's shoulders, my trip between Bukavu and Kalole was on foot. Many more trips were to follow in the years to come.

We became refugees in our own village, Kalole in the heart of the Bushi, the fiefdom of the Bashi, the tribe to which I belong. Luckily, we had a home there too. It was almost an estate. My father had inherited it from his father. It was only in the late fifties that he had actually left the village to go and work in town. In the process, he had left the Catholic education system and joined the state-run system. It was through this state-run system that he had benefited from a bursary to go and study overseas when I was born. It was through this same state education system that he moved ranks from teacher to school director to school inspector. Until his death he was known as "Inspecteur Boroto".

The rebellion that displaced us was confined to Bukavu and did not disturb the normal course of life in most villages. Ours was less than 50 km, south from Bukavu. Life there was a lot different from Bukavu. There was no running water and no electricity. The houses were huts. The two mothers had each a hut, which was also a kitchen. There were other huts. The main hut at the entrance was called the *ndaro*. This is where only men gathered in the evening around a fire in the middle of the hut to drink banana beer, *kasigisi* and to listen to the *lulanga*, the traditional flat harp with eight cords which was played by an expert singer, a *griot*, who often recounted stories of the past such as that of the famine during the times of the Mwami Lirangwe, one of the old Kings of the Bushi.

The famine was caused by either a drought or an invasion by crickets or both, I do not remember. The other story that was often told through the *lulanga* was that of the recent times of rebellion by Mulele in 1964. In my Great Lakes region, life seems to never be the same from one year to the other.

4

I started school while we were in Kalole as refugees. Going to school was an event, a graduation from staying home, clinging to the sides of my mother. That morning, she prepared me ceremoniously, bathing me with warm water in a *ngalingali* outside her hut. This is the top part of the 200 litres cylindrical container, *ngunguru*, which is used for storing fuel or palm oil for bulk sale. After the bath in the *ngalingali*, my mother fed me, giving me warm *fufu* and fish with a tasty gravy sauce and made a lunch pack for me, wrapped in a *chiréré*, the dry skin of a banana tree. I felt very important and

empowered. I knew that a new chapter had somehow started in my life. It is such punctual gestures from my mother that equipped me with the necessary energy and confidence to fight the unexpected but necessary battles of life that laid ahead of me.

Two of my classmates and best friends were Jean Marie Kalihira, known as Jajali, and Roger Bisimwa. The school was at the *chapelle-école*, which was one of the many village extensions of the main Catholic parish that was located in Walungu, the centre of the entire administrative entity.

My classroom was a small hall attached to the main building and with a roof made out of banana tree skins called *birere*. Our seats were long logs, two on each row and with nothing to rest our backs on. A black board faced us in front of the class and the teacher, *Mwalimu* Murhula Vincent, introduced us to the art of reading and writing. We were taught in French though we understood very little to the language itself. Sentences from the book *Mon ami Noé* such as the one used for learning the letters of the alphabet such as D and P still stick to the mind: "*Didace est dodu; le papa de Noé fume la pipe...*" *Mwalimu* Murhula Vincent was an excellent teacher so dedicated to his job that his face and clean handwriting on the blackboard with a white chalk are still clear in my mind. He had the character of a perfect man and called on us, without saying it, to strive for perfection. He opened our eyes to a new world. He was my first teacher and he left his mark on all of us who went through his class. We still speak of him with high esteem and love.