

Out of Africa

Life is always a journey. I am now an Australian citizen, although I was born in the Democratic Republic of Congo, and it was there that I grew up. I am also a refugee from the Congo Wars. My home is and forever will be now in Australia, and my journey to Australia has been long and complex. Yet it is only now that I am beginning to understand this journey.

The region in which I grew up was North Kivu, a province in the eastern part of the Congo. North Kivu is highland country, with good rainfall, large inland lakes, extensive forests, rich pasturelands, and a cool climate. Almost anything will grow there, and normally people have plenty to eat. If one had to choose a part of Africa in which to live, then, at least under normal circumstances, one would logically choose North Kivu.

The small town where I lived, Sake, is on Lake Kivu, and about half an hour from the regional city of Goma. From Sake one can see a blue line of the Virunga Mountains in the distance. Our name for these was “Crooked Teeth”, due to their jagged appearance. There are active volcanoes here, and sometimes at night we could see the red glow of eruptions, accompanied by a “boom, boom” of exploding lava.

My father (Papa) owned properties nearby to Sake, where he concentrated on raising cattle and growing crops. My mother (Maman) also worked on these properties. I was the eldest of the children, with two brothers and a sister. We also had many cousins in Kivu, as well as cousins and relatives over the border in nearby Rwanda. It was a good place to grow up, at least on the surface.

The underlying problem for our country was that we were ruled by an incompetent, corrupt and ruthless dictator, President Mobutu Sese Seko, backed for a long time by western powers. The country suffered from serious inflation, the breakdown of basic services and institutions, and increasing ethnic tensions. My parents tried to deal with the ethnic tension through working hard to be friends with people from all the different ethnic groups. For a while, this succeeded.

What changed everything for the worse was the Rwandan Genocide in 1994, when close to a million people were massacred. My province of North Kivu is next to Rwanda, and because of this it was not unexpected that millions fled over the border into my province during and after the killings. Unfortunately, those fleeing into Kivu included many of the perpetrators of the violence, as they feared retribution from a new government which had taken over in Rwanda.

This was not a war as it is normally known. It was difficult to identify a front line, as fighting forces criss-crossed vast areas of the Congo. And there were many irregular militias involved in the conflict, as well as forces from many nations. It was often difficult to understand who was fighting who. The nature of the war meant that civilians were often killed, merely because they were members of the wrong ethnic group.

What made things worse was that soldiers were often not paid. Thus, to survive, they needed to extort money and food from the local population. Agriculture gradually came to a halt. Farmers could not get their produce to markets, due to roadblocks. In any case, there

was little point growing crops if these were only going to be stolen. People began to starve. Some took to the nearby jungle, and attempted to live from jungle fruits and jungle meats, a very uncertain prospect at the best of times.

What was this like for me personally? For us kids, war was at first exciting. There were soldiers everywhere. They would sometimes let us look at their weapons, and we were impressed. At one stage I found a live grenade and took this home, keeping this for a time under my bed. I had no idea how dangerous this was. Predictably, when my papa found out, he promptly removed the item from our house.

One incident, however, changed my personal view of war quite dramatically. A group of us were returning to Sake, and we had hitched a ride on the back of a pick-up truck. Soldiers stopped the pick-up truck, and ordered three of us, all of the same ethnic group, to sit by the side of the road. One soldier recognized me, and this undoubtedly saved my life. I watched as the two other young boys of my ethnic group were taken away, and then beaten to death.

The fighting continued, and things continued to grow more and more chaotic in the Congo. For a short time, I left school and started a new life as a coltan trader. Coltan is a rare mineral mined in the Congo, which is used in mobile phones and computers. I was growing taller, and, wearing a suit, I could pass for someone much older. There was much money to be made but it was also very dangerous. Soon after my papa found out about this venture, however, I quit and returned to school.

Thus far I had escaped injury myself, but this too was to change. In December 2004, a minibus I was travelling in was ambushed on the way back to Sake. An old man of my ethnic group was taken off the bus and beaten to death in front of us. I almost escaped, but the soldiers caught up with me, and beat me with clubs and rifle-butts. Afterwards, I also realized that they had used either machetes or bayonets, as I still have the scars on my fingers where I tried to shield myself.

What I can remember from the beating is lots of blood and some bones sticking out of my legs. I passed out, and the soldiers left me for dead. My crime was that I was a member of the wrong ethnic group, and the soldiers saw me as an enemy to be destroyed. I was, however, fortunate in that there was an MSF (Doctors without Borders) patrol passing by later that afternoon, who picked me up, gave me emergency treatment, and took me to Goma Hospital.

In a hospital one would normally expect to be safe, but not so now. It was commonplace for patients to be put to death, because they were of an undesirable ethnic group. What saved me was that a local Catholic priest visited the hospital, and he paid money to the staff to ensure that I survived. Even then, the priest feared for my safety, and as soon as possible took me away from the hospital to a safe place in a nearby village.

One of the remarkable things about war and violence is that even when you think that things cannot be more chaotic, then they become still more chaotic. I could not go back to Sake at all, because the violence there made that out of the question. I was safe for a time at the nearby village, but eventually the priest told me that I needed to flee the Congo entirely.

I agreed, and he paid for a place on a pick-up truck, which took me to the Congo-Uganda border. Fortunately, I was not stopped at the border, and I walked, on crutches, into Uganda.

The years following were a mixture of ongoing uncertainty and struggle for survival. I spent years in various refugee settlements, and a considerable amount of time as a homeless refugee. Even in these settlements, there was no real safety, as the ethnic violence so prevalent in the Congo had spread there as well. You feared for your life because others would consider you to be of the wrong ethnic group, and thus a threat to them.

One positive at that time was that, by chance, I was re-united with my younger sister, who was also in a refugee settlement in Uganda. She was the only remaining member of my family of origin – all the others were presumed dead. Western countries often like to accept family units in their refugee intake, and thus both my sister and I were offered humanitarian visas to enter Australia, and to make our new home here.

Needless to say, like most Africans, we knew very little about Australia. We knew that it was sunny and hot, and given much of Africa is also sunny and hot, this encouraged us. We knew about the strange animals here, such as kangaroos. Strangely, we were also familiar with many Australian trees. Eucalypt trees have been planted widely in Africa, although I only became fully aware of this when in Australia I saw eucalypt trees everywhere.

Flying to Australia, and landing at Brisbane Airport, was a little surreal. We had never flown before. There have been many challenges in adjusting to a new life in Australia. We are now, however, free and safe. I am now living and working in Queensland, in the north of

Australia, with a wonderful wife and two beautiful children. Australian is my new home. But I will never forget my origins, and where I've come from. Out of Africa.
