



Bagabo Rashid

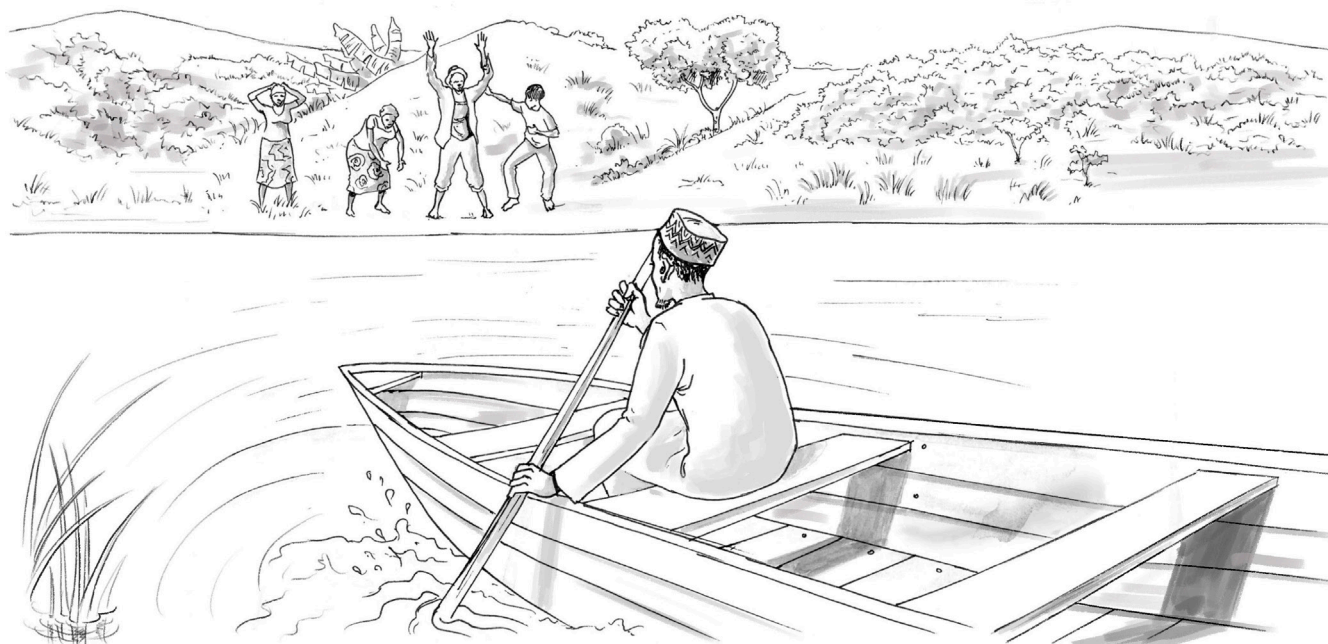


Illustration by Chris Rutayisire

I was leading Friday prayers when the reports started coming in that Tutsis were being attacked. I thought they were just rumours until, on Saturday morning, I saw people across the lake being chased by the Interahamwe. I ran to my boat, crossed the water, helped on board about eight of the people fleeing and rowed back. I took them to my house, which was next to the mosque where I was the imam.

At nightfall, I heard a knock and another twenty-two people were at my door. They had seen what I had done and had swum across the lake to seek refuge with me.

The next day, there were a hundred people from all over, asking for my help. I opened the mosque up for them as my house couldn't hold them. The women and children stayed inside all day while we, men, armed ourselves with stones, spears and sticks and waited for the attackers. When the Interahamwe came, they found us prepared. Although they had guns, we outnumbered them and they ran away.

However, the next day, they came back better armed and angrier. They came from right across Rwamagana with guns, grenades, and all sorts of other weapons. There were about a thousand of them and they had us surrounded.

Their leader asked the Hutus to step away from our group. He said that he had no quarrel with them.

He wanted only the Tutsis. I begged my fellow Muslims not to leave the group, but in the end, only fifty men remained.

We didn't stand a chance but we fought, nonetheless. They overpowered us and drew us into the swamp. They broke the windows of my mosque and threw in grenades. More than three hundred people were killed that day.

I fled because they held me responsible for the deaths of Hutu Interahamwe killed in the resistance. Still, I survived and they lost the war.

What I did was the only thing to do. Allah commands us to preserve life, no matter the risk.

As told to Eric Murangwa Eugene. Written by Jo Ingabire Moys.



Summary

Bagabo Rashid was an imam at a local mosque, and his testimony about the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda focuses on his efforts to rescue Tutsis and help them resist attacks by the Interahamwe (local militia). This testimony can help pupils or students aged 13–16 to continue learning about the events of the genocide and actions of different people.

Themes: rescue, resistance, religion, testimony

Context

Imam Bagabo Rashid explains that his actions to rescue Tutsis and support them in resistance stems from Allah's command to preserve life. Rwanda has a small Muslim community. In the 1991 census, 1-2% of Rwandans declared themselves Muslim and just under 90% Christian (Catholic <60% and Protestant >20%). There were reports of a rise in the number of Muslims in Rwanda after the genocide, but the government census in 2022 suggests that today 40% of Rwandans are Catholic, 21% are affiliated with Pentecostal Church, 15% are Protestant, 12% Adventist and 2% Muslim.

While the history of Islam in Rwanda is not well known, the religion arrived most likely with traders or soldiers serving colonial administrations called askaris. From early on, Islam's messages had to compete with the Catholic faith being spread by priests who arrived with European colonisers and offered Rwandans opportunities, including education. During the Belgian colonial period, the Catholic Church became a strong and influential institution in Rwanda. During the genocide many Tutsis sought refuge in churches. However, they were not protected there. Many members of clergy and church staff – some of them of European background – used their knowledge of the local population to identify Tutsis and aid killers, including the Interahamwe militia. Many churches turned into mass killing sites and some of them, such as Nyamata Church, are today genocide memorials. Bagabo's testimony offers an example of a religious leader making different choices. Other Muslim leaders and communities also participated in rescue and resistance efforts.

The complicity of the Catholic Church in the genocide remains a difficult topic. Many Rwandans struggled with their faith after the genocide. Christian churches also actively encouraged

survivors and their family members to forgive perpetrators, which was met with some resistance.

Lesson and activity ideas

Before engaging with Bagabo's testimony, learners should be aware of the history of Rwanda and how the country has been rebuilt since the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi. The Ishami Foundation History of Rwanda and Q&A with Eric Muragnwa Eugene may be helpful.

Learning objectives

- Increase awareness of events during the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda
- Understand an experience of rescue and resistance
- Consider the role of religious leaders and institutions during genocide

Starter

Ask students what they understand about the terms survivor, victim, perpetrator, bystander, or upstander based on their existing knowledge. For example, the class may draw on what they have already learnt about the Holocaust, the abolition of slavery or other significant historical events.

Activity 1 – Bagabo's story

Explain to learners that they will today learn more about an upstander who rescued Tutsis and resisted the Interahamwe during the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda. Share Bagabo's story and ask learners to read it, before discussing in pairs or small groups.

Questions

- **Why did Tutsis decide to approach Bagabo?**
- **How did his actions help Tutsis?**
- **What risks did Bagabo take to help?**
- **Why did he decide to resist the Interahamwe?**

Rescuers' decisions to help depend on personal qualities, such as values and beliefs, and circumstances of time, location, opportunity and risk. To take this topic further you could read other accounts of upstanders in the 100 Stories collection and compare what "rescue" means. See for example "Jo Ingabire Moys", "Daniel Nduwayezu", "Alphonsine Kabagabo" and "Martin Mutsindashyaka".

Activity 2 – Testimony

Explain to readers that Bagabo's story is a testimony. Ask the class if they understand what is meant by this. You may wish to share a definition on the board.

Testimony is an oral or written account of the past. Testimonies about genocide reflect an individual's memory of particular events and draw attention to their thoughts, feelings, beliefs and motivations at the time and in the present. Testimony can also refer to a formal statement or declaration. In law, testimony functions as evidence of a truth or fact, often when there is a lack of other forms of evidence such as written records. Most testimonies are meant to be shared with an audience.

Questions

- **What kind of testimony is this – oral or written?**
 - This testimony was told to Eric Murangwa Eugene in person. Jo Ingabire Moys then wrote an account of the story based on the recording. The story was subsequently checked by Bagabo Rashid and signed off for accuracy.
- **What is the role of testimony in the history of genocide?**
 - Testimony can provide an account of events when evidence of killings was hidden and little remains.

- **What other sources would you consult to write a history of what happened at the mosque?**
 - Discuss forensic evidence, official records, other witness accounts, and court testimonies.
- **What did this testimony add to the other accounts of Rwanda you have read?**
 - Learners may mention resistance, rescue and Islam.

Closing

Since this topic may be difficult for some learners, please reserve some time for them to discuss and reflect on this content. You can ask learners if they have questions that arise from the lesson and explore these together, focusing on thoughts and feelings. You may wish to close by asking the class: What could you do to be an upstander in your daily life?

Further resources

- Alrick Brown (dir.), *Kinyarwanda*. A feature film that explores the role of religious leaders as a part of a love story between a young Tutsi woman and Hutu man.
- *100 Days, 100 Stories: Rwandan Voices on the 1994 Genocide Against the Tutsi* edited by Jo Ingabire Moys. The volume includes many other stories that mention the role of religious leaders and faith as a source of strength for survivors or as a reason not to participate in killings.
- *The Test of Faith: Christians and Muslims in the Rwandan Genocide* by Richard Benda. A PhD thesis that provides an overview of religion in Rwanda, available on the Manchester University website.
- *Christianity and Genocide in Rwanda* by Timothy Longman. An account of the role of Christian churches in the genocide.

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