



BOOK NOTE REVIEW

Katongole, Emmanuel. *Who Are My People: Love, Violence, and Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa. Contending Modernities.* Notre Dame, Indiana, USA: University of Notre Dame Press, 2022, 2023. Pp. xii + 222. US\$35.00 (paperback), US\$100.00 (hardcover), US\$2.99 (ebook).

Stephanie A. LOWERY

ORCID: 0009-0006-2471-0471

Africa International University, Nairobi, Kenya
Mutanu.Lowery@gmail.com

Summary

Who Are My People? explores Christian and modern African identities, drawing on scholarly resources and stories to explore if and how Christianity brings transformation in the context of violence in Africa. Katongole contends that modern Africa has “a crisis of belonging” (3, 135, 136, 142, 177), which he traces through three identity markers: ethnicity, religion, and land. The author avers that Africa is undoubtedly modern; the problem is that it possesses a form of modernity rooted in violence, corruption, and chaos. In this crisis, Christianity needs stories and images that reveal the Christian identity as not static but rather a journey which fosters new forms of community. Indeed, the stories Katongole shares demonstrate that embracing the story of God’s suffering love in Christ produces powerful transformation and new communal identities. This love has the ability to see and work towards different ways of living, ways which Katongole describes as the “invention of love” which is “the antidote to Africa’s violent modernity” (4).

Katongole explores the role of imagination and story, exploring how Africa was defined and envisioned by the West in incredibly detrimental ways, and how this story has been ingrained in the thinking of many Africans. Within African theology, Katongole diagnoses a common error of viewing Christian identity as static, and therefore failing to understand its pilgrim nature, which points to the goal of a new self and a new community. Katongole rejects both the narrow, detached ‘spiritual identity’ and the ‘natural identity’ routes, claiming they fall short: they fail to see the subversive nature of the Christian identity and its embodiment in the church community. The author emphasizes Christian identity as ‘in-between,’ or in process, changing and growing as the Christian continues to be conformed to the image of Christ. The call to follow

BOOK REVIEW: *Who Are My People: Love, Violence, and Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa*, by Emmanuel Katongole

invites a person into a new community, the church. Katongole draws from Andrew Walls's 'pilgrim principle'¹ to highlight the uniqueness of God's people.

In Part 2, Katongole explores ethnic, religious, and ecological violence. The author rejects the idea that ethnic identities are foundational and unalterable. Therefore, he shares stories of those who have resisted viewing ethnicity as the most important aspect of their identity, demonstrating that the 'new family' in Christ offers the ability to resist tribalism. Regarding religious violence, he shows the Central African Republic is mired in despair and insecurity, and the language of religious violence is a cover for these deeper issues. Relief efforts within the country simply try to manage the despair, without envisioning how a different future could exist for the country. Katongole's view on the ecological crisis is that it destroys the land as well as people's dignity. It reflects a consumeristic view of one's environment, rather than the reality of interconnectedness between humanity and nature. Loss of one's homeland also leads to a further sense of insecurity and loss of identity. What is needed is a modernity that recognizes and respects the interconnectedness of persons and environment. It is the logic of self-sacrificing love, seen at the cross and embodied by followers of Christ, which can and does re-write stories of despair and re-form hopeless lives. Love is able to envision and create other possibilities, ones that offer transformed ways of living.

Evaluation

Katongole's latest offering foregrounds the role of story and imagination in Christians bringing transformation. Indeed, his own story gives 'flesh' to the academic aspect of his work, and the interviews he shares demonstrate that his work is both grounded in reality and also offering realistic hope of how Africa and African identities can be transformed. Katongole's multiple identities perhaps help him to see more clearly the truth that a person's identity changes with time — what Katongole desires is that Christians will realize the pilgrim nature of their identity and embrace the reconciliation which God would like to bring in and through their lives. He argues powerfully that

¹ Ref. Andrew F. Walls, "The Gospel as Prisoner and Liberator of Culture," *Faith and Thought* 108, nos. 1 and 2 (1981): 39–52.

Editors' note: Walls's article was reprinted in *Evangelical Review of Theology* 7, no. 2 (October 1983): 22–32. It was also republished, slightly revised, in *Missionalia* 10, no. 3 (1982): 93–105; and as chapter 1 in Walls's *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of the Faith*, 3–15 (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1996); and as chapter 1 in *New Directions in Mission & Evangelization* 3, edited by James A. Scherer and Stephen B. Bevans, 17–28, *Faith and Culture* (Orbis Books, 1999); and as "The Gospel as Prisoner and Liberator of Culture: Is There a 'Historic Christian Faith'?", chapter 9 in *Landmark Essays in Mission and World Christianity*, edited by Robert L. Gallagher and Paul Hertig, 133–138, *American Society of Missiology Series 43* (Orbis Books, 2009).

BOOK REVIEW: *Who Are My People: Love, Violence, and Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa*, by Emmanuel Katongole

God longs to expand a person's sense of 'who are my people?', so that it will include more and more people. The book makes the case, through both argument and personal examples from Katongole and those he interviewed, that a static view of identity is limiting and harmful, as well as fails to do justice to calling of Jesus to follow him.

However, Katongole at times appears to misrepresent his fellow African theologians. For him, they have chosen two different paths upon which to base identity: so-called 'spiritual' (detached from the material, concrete aspects of life) identities and 'natural' (ethnic) identities. In order to reject ethnocentrism, he goes to the other side of the spectrum and at times seems to imply Christians can leave the cultures in which they have been raised, to create a new 'Christian' culture. He also characterizes 'spiritual' identity as unconcerned with the material, concrete aspects of life. The characterization of these two paths of African theology will be an area where some will disagree with Katongole, and represent the weak point of this particular book. For instance, rooting one's identity in Christ in no way requires a detached response to other areas of life, including what he terms the material (historical, environmental, and political). Nor do the theologians he refers to advocate or practice either the detachment or the ethnocentrism which Katongole rightly rejects. This is an unfortunate short-coming in an otherwise strong work.

Aside from this, the work is well-balanced and rich, exploring many ways in which identity can be affected and re-shaped. *Who Are My People?* offers key reminders to Christians: embracing the love of God shown at the cross produces radical transformation, and stories have the power to shape what we believe is possible. Tying together various issues facing Africans with both intellectual work as well as personal testimonies is what makes this book impactful. It also offers a reminder that Christian identities are always at issue, as Christians seek to be salt and light in changing contexts.

This book would be useful for advanced undergraduates or graduate students who are ready to explore the complexities of Christian witness and identity in the African context particularly. It could also be used in courses on community development, politics, or environmental issues, specifically to demonstrate the integration of the Christian faith with those topics. Time spent reading Katongole is never wasted, as he continues to think carefully and deeply about the future of the African continent and envision concrete ways that her future can be bright.