

Women

A woman fighting for children's literature in Kinyarwanda

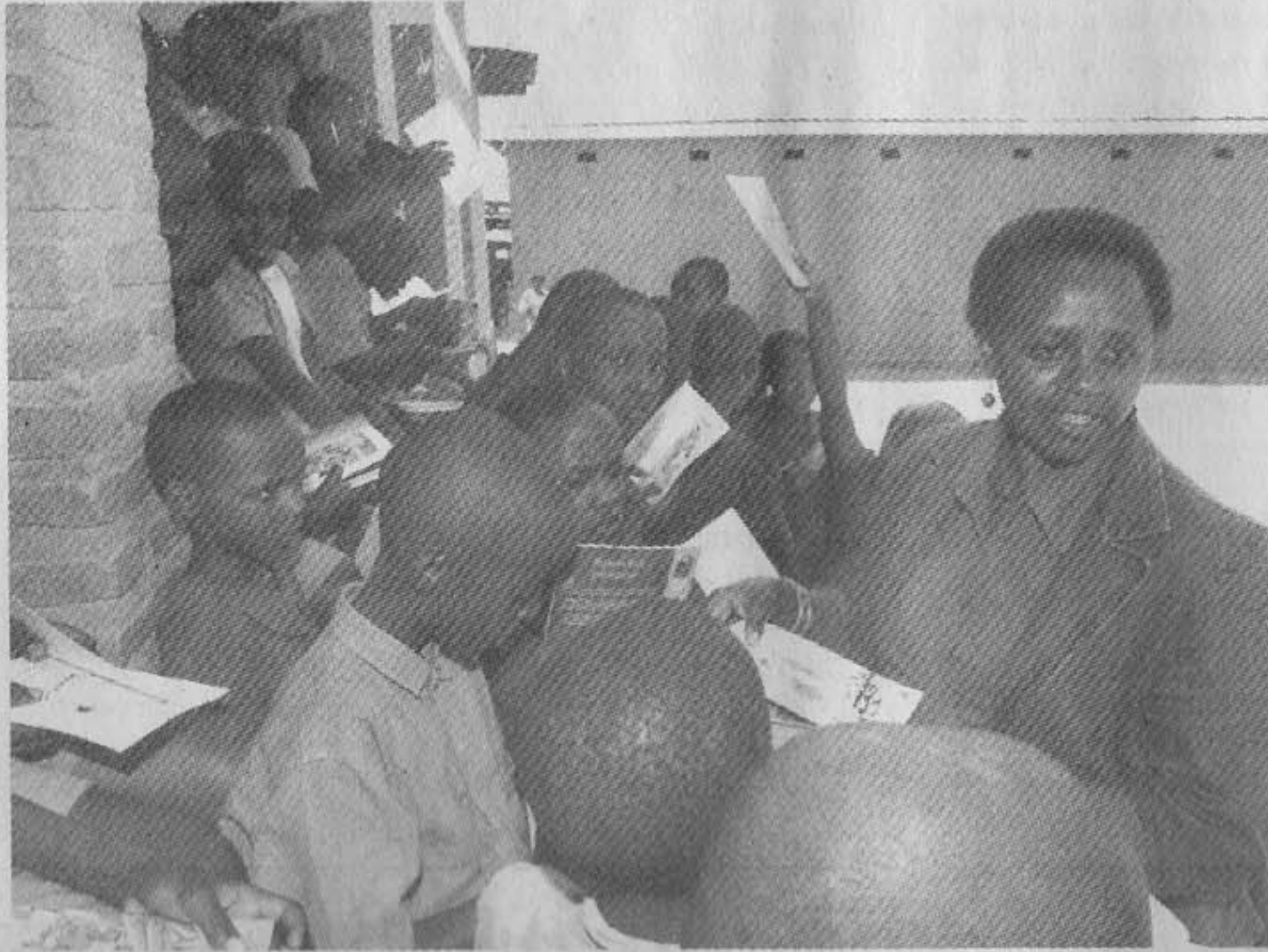
By Hellen Mwihoze

In 1995, right after the genocide, a woman named Agnes Gyr-Ukunda felt that children literature in *Kinyarwanda* will be one of the answers to rebuild her shattered country. So, together with some family members and friends, she decided to create a publishing house known as Editions Bakame. The project's main objectives are: (1) To create and promote youth literature based on Rwandan culture, (2) instill a reading culture in children and (3) form partnerships with associations having the same objectives.

While talking to her, this reporter learnt that Editions Bakame was the first publisher to create literature for children in local dialect. Agnes believes that it is essential today for children to acquire the culture of reading. This has been achieved in most developed countries, where children are introduced to interesting short stories with pictures. "Although they cannot read the words, children can look at the pictures and imagine what is happening" she said.

Why in Kinyarwanda?

"We are in Rwanda, if you want to create a culture of reading among Rwandans, it has to start in the language that every person can understand. It is also important to give children stories that they can relate to, upon which they can project themselves thus, acquire confidence in their own potential. Otherwise you might be confusing or even alienating them. Later on as they grow, because they have already mastered their native language, it becomes easy to read and learn in any other language. It is a well established psycho-pedagogy fact that children who master their "mother tongue" are also those who learn with ease any foreign language. So, from an early age children



develop interest in reading and eventually reading becomes a habit and this helps them to study all subjects with much more ease. The culture of reading is a lifelong skill that permits to continue to learn long after one has left school," Agnes underscored.

Since we know that literature is found in fiction, novels, short stories, plays, and poems that encompass a recognizable aesthetic quality, then surely for the last 9 years Edition Bakame has been producing children literature, in which illustrations and texts go hand in hand. To help build the love of reading, the organization has various programs for children from different schools in Kigali who are on holidays to participate in "creative writing workshops" where they can polish their literary skills in *Kinyarwanda*, English and French.

While talking to those children in Camp Kigali School, one child, Muhinda Denis told me that what he likes most about these activities is to read books that have pictures, recite poems and act plays in different languages. He likes also to mingle with children from other

schools.

Their teacher explained that this helps children improve on their language skills so much, because, "when a child is reciting a poem or is acting a play, he is having fun and finds it very interesting, he will read, talk and think about it. Meanwhile, s/he is learning all that needs to be known about the language and cannot forget about it because it is his/her own doing. In reality it is the best way to teach a language to children." This interview was following a two weeks workshop which was held at St. Paul in Kigali, where authors and illustrators of children's books were being trained on how to create quality books for children. The workshop was sponsored by Editions Bakame and conducted by IllusAfrica.

The main trainer in the workshop was Dominique Mwankumi, founder of IllusAfrica, a Congolese national who lives in Europe and is a very successful author and illustrator of children books who has won many prizes.

Dominique Mwankumi told us that "IllusAfrica is an association of African authors and illustrators whose

goal is the creation of quality books that depict an environment in which African children can recognize themselves." He added that they have been conducting these workshops in Benin, Mali, Togo, Cameroon, Burkina Faso, DRC, Senegal, Congo, Rwanda and Namibia. "It is the 3rd module out of the four we are conducting in Rwanda and the progress is spectacular. Rwandan illustrators have shown a lot of talent. As a matter of fact, the cover of 2003 IllusAfrica brochure – presented at the Bologna

International Children Books's Fair - was realized by a Rwandan illustrator named Felix Seminega. The closure of this workshop on the 15th of November was attended, among other officials, by the Director of culture in the Ministry of Youth, Culture and Sports, Jean Butoto, who said that since the material is written and illustrated in *Kinyarwanda*, this helps in developing the minds of young Rwandans. "When you look at these pictures, you laugh because of the humor you see in the illustration. Can you imagine the impact these images have on those young children who laugh easily?" he asked.

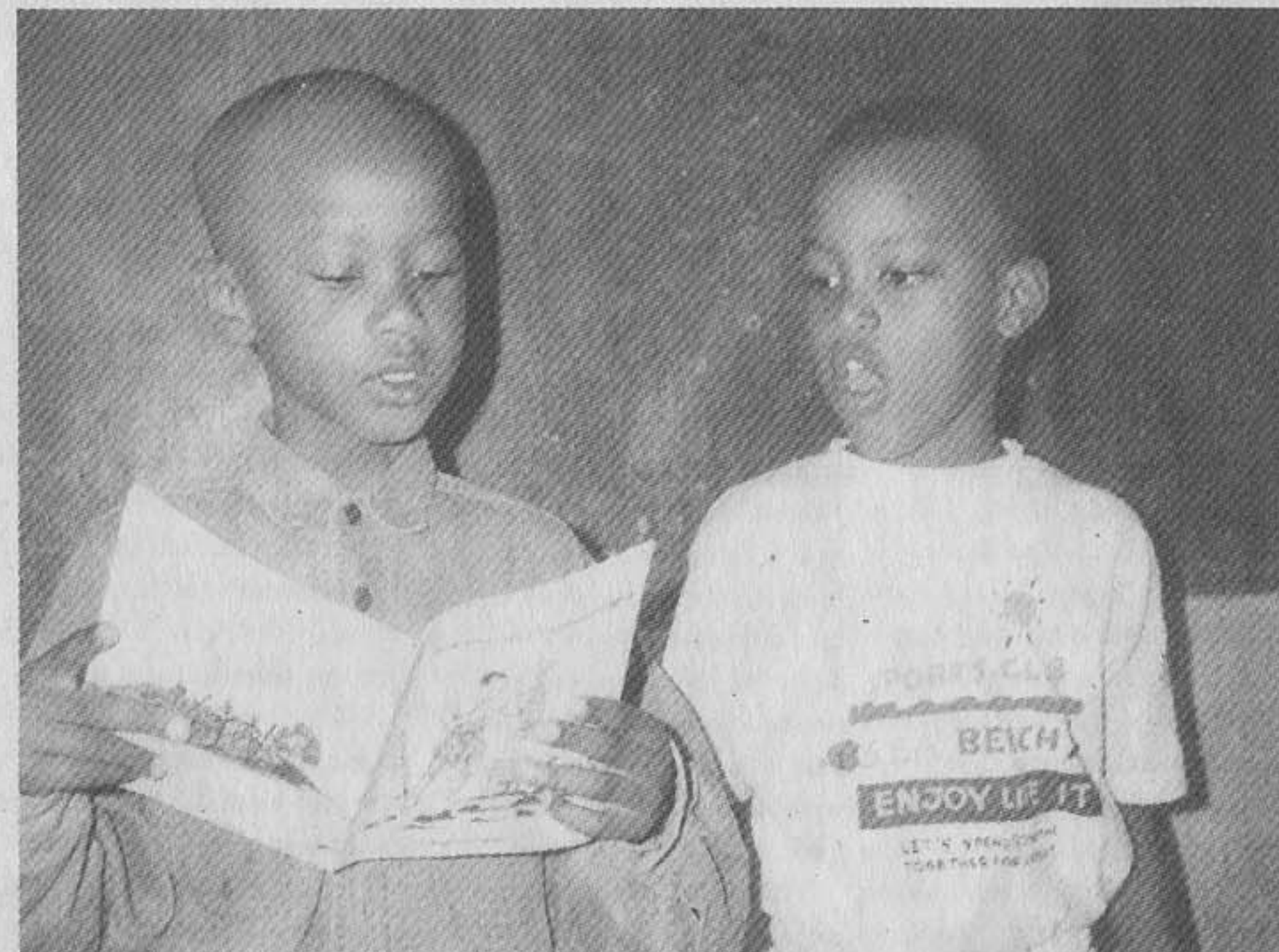
When other people talk of Vision 2020, Bakame is talking of Vision 2010. They have a vision that by 2010, they will have completed the construction of a cultural house, surrounded by a green space where there will be a reading pavilion, an ICT centre to familiarize the children with the information technology and all other activities to stimulate the culture of reading, (drawing, poetry, theatre...).

On this project Agnes Gyr-Ukunda said "It will be

very difficult to reach the goal 2020 if Rwanda has not a large number of well read people. The lack of a reading culture affects social and economic development of many communities in Africa, and a culture of reading is acquired when people are still young. That is why we must act as a matter of urgency to place quality books in the hands of our children. Thus, our Vision 2010 is a prerequisite for the national Vision 2020."

She pleads with parents and policy makers to participate fully in the creation of an environment conducive to the advent of a culture of reading. Agnes Gyr-Ukunda asserts that "reading the appropriate book at the appropriate time is one of the most influential factors in a child's life."

Her statement reminded me of an article I read in the magazine *NewAfrican*, N° 430 June 2004, where an Eritrean professor and publisher, Kassahun Checole said in an interview with Ivor Agyeman-Duah that: "It is a tragedy in our history that, as Africans, we have not noticed the relationship between language and civilization." It is fortunate then that Editions Bakame has had the vision to produce children's books in *Kinyarwanda*. "Bana dusome" is its motto. There is hope.



Kinyarwanda will be one of the answers to rebuild our Country