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On Behalf of Ordinary People: Bridging the Gap between High Politics and Simple Tragedies

Danielle de Lame

Without minimizing the horrors of the genocide in Rwanda in 1994, the book by Marie Béatrice Umutesi, *Fuir ou mourir au Zaïre* ("Running Away or Dying in Zaïre," L'Harmattan, 2000), published under the English title *Surviving the Slaughter: The Ordeal of a Rwandan Refugee in Zaire*," throws a much needed light on the plight of Rwandan refugees in Kivu from the time they fled Rwanda, many of them as ordinary, peaceful citizens. If we want to understand the events that continue to unfold in the region, and if we want to improve the aid humanitarian agencies provide, we need to consider Umutesi's story—a story in which distant international organizations, with their own views and objectives, took actions that had deleterious consequences for ordinary people.

While some refugees pursued dubious policies in the camps, people of good will went on helping others while they all were in exile. Their collective support systems helped them retain their dignity under the worst of circumstances and, when their fragile safe haven came under attack, helped them endure a hell that seemed at times unendurable. Telling the complete history, as Jan Vansina helped to do in his recent book (2004), and putting ordinary people back into the picture, are the surest ways to avoid lethal stereotypes and quick categorizations that hinder our understanding of complex situations and produce simplifications that contribute to more injustice.

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The English translation of the title of the book, with its reference to slaughter, keeps the reader, intentionally or unintentionally, thinking about the genocide of the Rwandan Tutsi. This points to the complexities of the situation and to the many consequences of the massive movements of populations in the Great Lakes area during the genocide. Individual motives and feelings were caught in this human landslide, as the strategies of politicians and militaries, combined with the blindness of international agencies, produced a series of lethal outcomes. The fears of ordinary citizens who did not always chose freely to quit Rwanda and flee to Zaire, or who went with the flow because they chose a course of action that seemed less uncertain than the situation they were leaving behind, were the driving forces of a massive displacement that can either be perceived as shapeless or identified with the will of its determined leaders.

Generalizations simply give fuel to further stereotyping and hinder comprehension of the dynamics at play. Simplifications are easy and cheap, and they meld with ideologies that mask the motives of those resorting to them. Is it not, then, the task of historians and social scientists to broaden their field of study and delve more deeply into the diversity of motives of social actors? Individual stories should not be seen as one case contradicting another, but rather as multiple versions of history that all contribute to making sense of the past from different perspectives. Each of these lives is encompassed by fluctuating constraints that determine and modify the set of choices that knowledge, learned responses, and values can make available and meaningful. Seen in this perspective, as Vansina (2000) points out, Umutesi's story is "an epic of our times, a tale to ponder for the lessons it conveys, testimony so powerful and moving that it reaches an unintended literary greatness." This book does not, indeed, belong to immediate history, but it restores a human dimension that has been lacking in the history of the genocide and massacres in Rwanda. Huge parts of Congo fell into greater disarray after the genocide in Rwanda in 1994. Umutesi presents a unique testimony, offering a side of the story that has been overlooked as an excess of repetitive writing has been unable to make sense of the tragedies in the Great Lakes. These writings have drawn upon images that prevent analysis or have desperately attempted to promote a unidimensional version of history that would legitimate the victors (see Pottier 2002). The scanty accounts drawn from the survivors, and more recently from prisoners, have been in tune with this simplified version of history. Umutesi's testimony brings us back to the complexity of reality and to current events still causing immense distress in the area from which she managed to escape. Her book, with its literary and moral qualities, will be read by many.

As we assess the book, it is important to trace some critical historical facts and to contextualize what we have learned about the Bukavu refugee camps. Rwanda is a small, landlocked country in central Africa, situated mainly on the eastern side of the Zaire–Nile divide. It is bordered on the

west by Lake Kivu. It was the last country in Africa to be explored by Westerners. The rule of the Tutsi lineage in power at the time was far from benign.[1] When these explorers got to know the country, the names Hutu, Tutsi, and Twa were already used to designate socially specialized groups, as well as a hierarchy, and the meaning of these names could differ according to region and circumstance (see Czekanowski 1917; Newbury 1988; de Lame 1996). Rwanda was a German protectorate until 1916. It became a Belgian mandate that year, with Belgium starting to administer the territory effectively in 1923. During its rule, Belgium reinforced, and to a great extent racialized, the social categories that had been more fluid in the past. This, however, had greater consequences for the formation of an elite than it had for the ordinary population, which was only indirectly affected, mainly through the various authorities and subchiefs who controlled taxation and compulsory labor. Meanwhile, ethnic affinities remained flexible, depending on circumstances.

Another aspect of Belgian and missionary policy was to keep the country underurbanized (see Sirven 1984). On the eve of the genocide, about 95 percent of the population lived in the countryside, which made it possible to talk about an overpopulation. Indeed, in a country without any industry, the densities were very high, and there was a land shortage. This could only be dealt with through industrialization, not through villagization.

During the colonial period, ethnographies were produced, some of which reflected the views of the vested interests of the colonizers and of the local elite they encountered. One of these extremely biased ethnographies is the book by J. J. Maquet (1954). In the field of history, A. Kagame (1972, 1975) produced interesting documentation, but also portrayed the country as one that embraced the royal ideology (see Vansina 2004). This vision, among other things, has become instrumental again in fostering an ideology of the "grand Rwanda," which the current government promotes. Other writers—not only Belgians—romanticized the Egyptian origin of the Tutsi, and this became part of the ideology of genocide.

After World War II, democracy was the order of the day, and Tutsi elite (both traditionalist and modernist, educated mainly by the missionaries) were confronted with a new Hutu elite promoted by the churches and their seminaries. This conflict, and the support of both the Catholic Church and the Belgian state, produced a revolution in 1959. The U.N. became a stage for the action of Tutsi parties demanding immediate independence. Belgium remained influential in the country until its independence in July 1962.

The seeds were sewn for the first recourse to ethnicity as a tool in the contemporary conflict in Rwanda. At first, this conflict was informed by the many democratic political parties introduced in the country as a condition of independence. Soon, however, with the suppression of all opposition by the first president of the country, ethnically driven politics took another

turn. The massacre of Tutsi in 1963–64 forced a section of the Tutsi population into exile. The exiles went to various countries, with a large proportion of them settling in neighboring Uganda, Burundi, and Congo.

A coup brought J. Habyarimana to the presidency in 1973. While his predecessor had been rather reticent, Habyarimana opened the country to donors and in 1976 officially encouraged civil servants to do business. Cash started to flow toward this small, peaceful, Christian country, where donors could feel they were spending their money well (see Uvin 1999). In fact, under cover of development, social inequalities were becoming greater and a new elite was enriching itself at a relatively quick pace. In the context of urbanization, the local culture of political networking took the form of clientelism as it had developed in precolonial times and had reinforced itself during the colonial period. Only now the people involved in clientelistic networks were different: they were mainly Hutu born of parents who had had some access to schooling. The revolution had put new people in ruling positions, but governance structures were resistant to change. When the International Monetary Fund imposed structural adjustment programs, and when aid became conditional on multiparty democracy, the regime in power felt its position threatened. The government did not have the wisdom to listen to the demands of the refugees to be allowed back into the country. Meanwhile, the RPF had constituted itself in 1988 (see Prunier 1995).

At the end of 1988, ethnic terms came to be used again in derogatory ways, especially after ethnic problems in Burundi caused an influx of Hutu Burundian refugees into Rwanda. As freedom of the press was being encouraged, this racist ideology spread to the hills, with leaflets distributed by civil servants and merchants, the only people in contact with the cities. On October 3, 1990, the RPF invaded the country, causing massive displacements and the creation of camps for displaced people, mainly around the capital city.[2] The RPF launched more attacks from the north starting in January 1991, causing displacements and retaliations. They attacked again in 1992 and 1993. Testimonies from victims in the north may have increased fears of being displaced or killed. Meanwhile, the refugee camps had become recruiting pools for militias. A climate of terror had developed along with participatory democracy. This was reminiscent of a past of which those promoting multiparty democracy seem to have been oblivious. Political parties channeled loyalties along ethnic lines rather than rallying people around programs, while most of the population remained unaware of the negotiations taking place in Arusha.

Habits of clientelism in the countryside, with civil servants and merchants enjoying a quasi-monopoly on the cash needed by peasant families, provided channels for the organization and, to some extent, the implementation of the genocide. Submission and conformity, well established in the local culture, and more than anything else, fear, made it easy for politicians to mobilize a population. The events of the previous few years had

made people receptive to their messages. Conditions were in place for genocide. Its onset was triggered by the shooting down of the presidential plane. Yet in many places the authorities had to force people into submission in order to have them accomplish what they had planned, or to call militias to kill people they did not know. Some authorities resisted, but with few exceptions they were overwhelmed by the militias. When it appeared that the RPF would take hold of Rwanda, massive flows of refugees fled to neighboring countries, especially to Zaire.

The RPF took over a country emptied of its wealth, equipment, elite, and about a third of its population. Nearly eight hundred thousand people were killed in the massacres, about one million were internally displaced, and about 1.7 million took to the roads and fled to neighboring countries. The lack of preparedness of humanitarian agencies testifies to their general blindness of the situation, but also to the fact that they were overstretched in terms of resources. They had, indeed, been supporting the internally displaced in Rwanda for the previous three years, as well as coping with a famine in the southern part of the country. Once the move started, they did a job that, under the circumstances, was impressive but resulted in situations that were often far from ideal. Political scientists analyze these population movements as parts of war strategies. From a strictly humanitarian standpoint, Opération Turquoise succeeded in delaying flows of refugees crossing from southwest Rwanda into Bukavu. Between mid-July and mid-August 1994, eight hundred and fifty thousand Rwandans arrived in Goma (Zaire) and three hundred thousand in Bukavu. About six hundred thousand had settled in Ngara (Tanzania). Overstretched agencies deployed remarkable efforts but dealt with the situation in ways that allowed for problems to multiply. While the outbreak of cholera caused an outcry about the (understandably difficult) organization of the huge Goma camps, the rampant difficulties refugees experienced in the small, dispersed Bukavu camps went unnoticed.

I shall now concentrate on this area where refugees arrived in very large numbers before the UNHCR managed to organize camps. Bukavu and its surroundings, where elite Rwandans had connections, became host to their influx.[3] After having organized the genocide, Rwandan authorities took part of the population with them as pawns, and they were followed by masses of people fearing indiscriminate retaliation by the RPF. The authorities chose sites that did not conform to the rules of international law. Their reasons are easy to understand, explained by previous connections and, more important, by the proximity of the border. While the UNHCR had not foreseen the first massive influx, those arriving in trucks (sometimes stained in blood), buses, and cars had been able to plan for their settlement as they knew the area, had contacts with the local authorities and notables, and could stay in touch with their friends. They took the UNHCR by surprise and horrified the local resident population. The wealthiest ones were the first to arrive. As Umutesi writes, the crowd was mixed, and peo-

ple of good will traveled along and settled with killers and organizers of the genocide. Only the last camp created, Kalehe, conformed to international rules. It was populated by the most destitute, who had arrived last, and it was well organized, with adequate infrastructure and health care.

A lake can be more of a contact zone than a border. All the sites where refugees settled before the UNHCR could intervene were too close to the border, some of them almost on the shores of the lake, or even on Ijwi Island. Crossings for various purposes took place daily, but this applied only to a small minority who had reasons to take the risk. In the Bukavu area twenty-six camps were spread out on a long stretch from Kalehe to Nyangezi-Murwa and Chimanga. The composition of the population and their organizational structure varied from camp to camp. Some Bukavu camps had strictly hierarchical structures and were run by politicians who kept a rather tight grip on the people. In other ones, the social composition of the population was more homogenous. This was the case of Inera, where Umutesi settled. The UNHCR and other agencies did notice some differences among the various camps, but they did not bother to analyze these differences or their implications. As Umutesi reports, lumping everyone into the category of murderers prevented the agencies from discriminating between alleged organizers (a well-known prefect was still acting as a prominent physician in one camp) and refugees who were simply trying to make sense of the hellish situation. Fraud made it impossible to assess the exact number of refugees entitled to food. Wealthy refugees could buy space and housing materials or engage in business with the Bukavu people. All were suspected of political activities, but real political activity (for example, on the part of refugees who were enlisted as UNHCR drivers and acted as liaisons between one camp and another) went unnoticed. Because all refugees were lumped into the category of mass murderers, Umutesi writes, they were distrusted and treated with disgust.

Measures were taken to see that everyone received food, but many expatriate field officers did not go into the field to check on the disbursement of the food. They said they felt powerless and sent their local and Rwandan assistants instead. Trade with the Zairian people occurred, and food was resold at quite profitable prices by those who had managed to stockpile it. As a result, fraud as well as intimidation occurred. At times there were food shortages. Often the only food distributed was food to which Rwandans were not accustomed (e.g., maize). Wood had to be bought by the agencies and it was in short supply as traditional techniques of cooking the usual staples required high quantities of fuel. Some refugees organized collective cooking. One can sympathize with the complaints of refugees, and certainly with their plight, but some complaints should be nuanced. One cannot forget the challenges confronting the agencies. I witnessed how ingeniously the WFP arranged to bring supplies daily. Among all the difficulties, certainly, were human imperfections in the implementation of measures that were not always carried out with enough respect for

individuals or enough comprehension of the totality of the situation.

Locally, interactions with Zairians got more complicated as time passed. After a few months, the damage to the environment was obvious. The refugee camp areas were prone to erosion, and within months they were completely cleared of trees. Local commerce in Bukavu was totally disrupted by the new opportunities and low prices refugees could request for any item they wanted to resell. Refugees could also work for Zairians, and relationships were sometimes good at an individual level.

Insecurity, however, made it necessary for the Zairian army to be called in from Kinshasa and for local Zairian camp administrators to be enrolled. While some of the troops were amiable (with me at least), as Umutesi reports, abuses and conflicts were caused by their presence. On the other hand, many refugees did not accept the presence of local Zairian administrators, whom they saw as intruding in their own organization of the camps despite the fact that they were on Zairian territory.

Further complicating the situation was the massive arrival of (more or less) organized do-gooders in search of visibility. This made the job of the official agencies unnecessarily difficult, especially in the first crucial stages when the appeal was seen as short-term and cash appeared limitless. All this raises the question of the changing political stakes for the Zairian/Congolese and Rwandese in handling the international agencies in the area. It seems that local plans progressively evolved out of a rather chaotic situation that agencies were unable to prevent.

While no fact mentioned by Umutesi can be dismissed, putting her story into this humanitarian context seems necessary. She speaks the truth. But it is *her* truth. And this is where anthropologists and historians meet. While Umutesi's book testifies to one person's experience of the plight of hundreds of thousands who fled through the forests of Congo, it does not take into account the variety of situations that people encountered in the camps. Just as each of the Bukavu camps had its specific characteristics, refugees experienced their exile in different ways. Promiscuity caused by the lack of private housing was unacceptable to everyone, but it might have been resented more by peasants accustomed to living in a dispersed habitat than by townspeople. Shortages of goods that peasants had never known, on the other hand, may have been experienced more acutely by more sophisticated refugees. Better-off refugees could afford to buy goods, to flee from the camps, or to travel to and fro, while those who wanted to consult with the UNHCR and go back home were intimidated. Powerful people of all ranks were able to intimidate those who were accustomed to complying, and this had an impact on many aspects of life in the camps. Grandmothers gave their food to their healthiest grandson to prolong the patriline, whereas parents hoped that girls would secure a husband who would take care of them in the future. Lonely women and girls entered into unions through which they felt they could seek protection. Violence, robbery, and rape were realities in the camps. People did not become less dif-

ferent from one another under the protection of the UNHCR than they had been in Rwanda. At the same time, the relief agencies were not any more self-critical than they had been before the genocide.

As the Joint Evaluation of Emergency Assistance to Rwanda reported:

> In the absence of a coherent political approach, it seems that humanitarian agencies, encouraged by the new government and certain Western political leaders, developed and pursued strategies, such as encouraging the early repatriation of refugees, that attempted (but failed) to substitute for political solutions to the crisis.... Reports or events that questioned the new government's commitment to respecting human rights and threatened to undermine these strategies were suppressed or played down in public, though some governments did press the human rights questions in private. Despite the massive loss of life and the expenditure of enormous sums of money, an estimated number of 1.8 million Rwandese remain in camps outside of their country and many observers expect the civil war to be resumed at some point. A solution remains distant. (deLame 1996: vol. 3, p. 15)

This was published in March 1996. A few months later, the camps were attacked, and yet again, international confusion let chaos reign. An estimated three million died in Kivu over the ensuing eight years, the majority of them civilians unwillingly caught in the conflicts. Many Rwandan refugees were among the victims, and the fact that those who are still alive in Congo play an active role in the regional conflict, conveniently distracting attention from other actors, should not make us forget the dead who could have been saved and the hatred the manhunt fostered. Neither should these rebels distract our attention from those who foster our trust in humanity. They may be anonymous peasants courageously resuming their hard life in Rwanda as much as great Rwandans who live in exile. While helping us to disentangle generalizations, Umutesi's book provides us with an optimistic answer and an exemplary testimony.

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Notes

1. See, among others, von Götzen (1899:171): "In front of us, like a gigantic wall, stood yet another range of mountains. We could see, in the farth, flames and thick smokes rising up to the sky. Sharangabo proudly declared that his father (the king), was gathering tribute and punishing those who did not comply" (my translation).
2. For a more detailed account of the persons displaced by the advance of the RPF, See *International Response* 3: 27–28; before genocide started, there were about three hundred thousand internally displaced people who had retreated from the north.
3. As a member of the team engaged to evaluate humanitarian aid (Joint Evaluation), I stayed there for three weeks in July 1995 and met again with some of the people I had known in Rwanda during my extensive fieldwork in social anthropology.

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