

# Do We Understand Life after Genocide? Center and Periphery in the Construction of Knowledge in Postgenocide Rwanda

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**Abstract:** Do we really understand life after genocide? A reflection on the construction of knowledge in and on Rwanda reveals that it is rife with contradictory assertions and images, and that there is a discrepancy between image and reality. This article attempts to map the center(s) of knowledge construction in postgenocide Rwanda, the place not only where policy is made, but also where knowledge is actively construed, managed, and controlled. It argues that an overall cultivation of the aesthetics of progress and a culturally specific communication code have contributed to an active interference in the scientific construction of knowledge. It stresses the need for scholars and observers to reveal the social and historical context for the knowledge being generated. It also urges them to physically and mentally move away from the center of society: to adopt a bottom-up perspective that captures the voices of ordinary people.

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## Introduction

The postgenocide Rwandan regime is often hailed for its remarkable socioeconomic recovery after the total destruction it experienced in 1994. At the same time, however, the regime is often portrayed as increasingly authoritarian, with political dignitaries, ordinary people, and members of

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the international community all submissive to the rules, regulations, and discourses laid out for them as in a “rehearsed participation in public affairs” (African Peer Review Mechanism 2005:58). One can find the most divergent claims and conclusions on all themes constituting the postconflict agenda, notably on issues of justice, security, and development, with governance in general as the underlying factor (Uvin 2007:41). The lack of consensus on the postconflict achievements and essential components of Rwandan society signals the apparent difficulty, if not impossibility, of separating image from reality, the imaginary from the real.

As a researcher, I undertook more than twenty months of fieldwork in rural Rwanda between 2004 and 2008. This article is a reflection on the practice of doing research in and on Rwanda. It is equally a reflection on the way knowledge is being generated in and on Rwanda, an issue previously analyzed by Pottier (2002). A combination of obstacles encountered during fieldwork necessitates this reflection. First and foremost, there is the difficulty of gaining access to the “field”—a term that refers not only to the geographical area of Rwandan rural life, where the majority of the population lives, but also to the thematic domain of research topics, such as ethnicity, governance, justice, poverty, inequality, and democracy. Due to a range of reasons that will be explored in this article, these topics are largely under- or unexplored variables in postgenocide Rwanda. Second, this article grew out of frustration over the sheer impossibility of communicating my findings to the foreign residents of Kigali on the nature of rural life and the undercurrents of social processes at work. Rwanda’s capital, Kigali, functions as an outpost of progress where Rwanda is presented and experienced as the beacon of hope, development, and change on the African continent. Rwanda has indeed experienced a gigantic leap forward since the total destruction experienced in 1994. Nevertheless, more discouraging trends often remain hidden and can be discerned only by looking beyond surface appearances, as difficult as such an exercise may be.

In Rwanda, as in many African societies and political situations, it is important to take into account the dialectic of transparency and conspiracy (West & Sanders 2003), the interplay of truth and lies (de Lame 2004; Turner 2005, 2008; Ingelaere 2009), and the presence of the invisible in the visible (Mbembe 2001; De Boeck & Plissart 2005). In particular, there is a problem in Rwanda of taking the “*mise-en-scène*,” or stage-setting, for granted, instead of searching for and capturing the meaning and overall direction of life. Such difficulties in interpretation are widespread, as the literature on Rwanda shows; in a society in which daily life itself is politicized, it is difficult for an observer to interpret or gain a balanced understanding of the social milieu. An active interference in the scientific construction of knowledge, the cultivation of an aesthetics of progress, and a culturally specific ethics of communication all lie at the heart of difficulties in understanding life after genocide.

## Gourevitch's "The Life After" as Case-Study

Philip Gourevitch's well-known article on Rwanda, entitled "The Life After" (Gourevitch 2009a), offers important testimony about the difficulties in understanding postgenocide Rwanda.<sup>1</sup> Gourevitch had been a reporter in Rwanda in the immediate aftermath of the genocide and published a widely read book (Gourevitch 1999) that was severely criticized for its one-dimensional understanding, or at least rendering, of the situation in the country (Pottier 2002:56–57,168–69).<sup>2</sup> A 2009 trip brought him back to Rwanda where, as the subtitle of the article suggests, he found that "the reconciliation defies expectations" and that "there is a possibility of peace." Those claims, however, represented the replacement of reality with image, facts with discourse. Although Gourevitch reported interesting and revealing encounters and insights achieved during a trip to the countryside, he was unable (or unwilling) in this second publication to question surface appearances and the discourse of the new Rwandan elite.

Gourevitch begins his article with an overview of the achievements of Rwanda's leadership and the positive trends in Rwandan society:

On the fifteenth anniversary of the genocide, Rwanda is one of the safest and the most orderly countries in Africa. Since 1994, per-capita gross domestic product has nearly tripled, even as the population has increased by nearly twenty-five per cent, to more than ten million. There is national health insurance, and a steadily improving education system. Tourism is a boom industry and a strong draw for foreign capital investment. In Kigali, the capital, whisk-broom-wielding women in frocks and gloves sweep the streets at dawn. Plastic bags are outlawed, to keep litter under control and to protect the environment. Broadband internet service is widespread in the cities, and networks are being extended into the countryside. Cell phones work nearly everywhere. Traffic police enforce speed limits and the mandatory use of seat belts and motorbike helmets. Government officials are required to be at their desks by seven in the morning. It is the only government on earth in which the majority of parliamentarians are women. Soldiers are almost nowhere to be seen...." (2009a:37–38)

On the next page he adds a bucolic touch:

Where I remembered an empty valley overgrown with bush, there were now neatly planted fields of beans, manioc, and sorghum, dotted with men hoeing and women stooping to harvest and reseed—a saw mill here, a livestock corral there. Old buildings were missing, new buildings were everywhere, and places where I'd never seen anyone were crowded with foot traffic. Much was familiar. Indeed, much felt eternal: the rise and fall of the sweeping, vaguely Tuscan vistas—rigorously terraced hills, pocked by low stands of banana trees and an occasional towering eucalyptus, with farmhouses clinging to the slopes, and every so often an imposing red

brick church on the summit, its bell tower cut against a hazy, cloud-spattered sky. (2009a:39)

These descriptions reflect what can indeed be observed in Rwanda—although the observer may have been impressed more by window dressing than by real developments, and the descriptions of the Rwandan countryside are heavily embellished by his own lyricism. Even more problematic is his reiteration of the claims made by the Rwandan leaders who were his usual interlocutors and guides. Kagame himself tells him that “Ten million people now in this country have never been happier in the history of this country. It’s better, Rwanda, far better than it has ever been. I have no doubt about that.” Kagame instructs him “to look around, go around, go to the villages,” assuring him that if he fails “to see the sense of hope in their eyes, then I won’t be telling you the truth” (Gourevitch 2009a:38).

Gourevitch does go into the countryside, albeit for a brief visit.<sup>3</sup> But despite his general conclusions, his visual impressions and the narratives he hears are clearly rife with fear, distrust, and a lack of empathy for others. What he subsequently describes related to the Gacaca process and the perception of ordinary life is what everybody who has spent a significant amount of time in the rural areas of Rwanda has to conclude: that nobody likes Gacaca, it is not working very well, and it is bringing neither reconciliation nor justice. Survivors hear about reconciliation on the radio, but such talk will not bring back their family. A former killer named Girumuhatse explains that reconciliation and confession are “a program of the state.” A survivor named Mariane dismisses requests for pardon as theater, a performance in the interest of the government. Another survivor questioned about how he manages to live alongside neighbors released from prison who had been the killers of his family members says that, in fact, he is not managing at all, he just pretends to get along. Gourevitch’s friend in Kigali confirms that “they talk about reconciliation, but that it is the reverse.” The picture Gourevitch presents is only a snapshot of Rwandan life—and in other contexts (such as his *New York Times* commentary on Abu Ghraib [2009b]), he himself has expressed wariness about the accuracy of such superficial reports. Nevertheless, even the mere snapshot he presents here is rather a bleak one, contrary to his overall message.<sup>4</sup>

Gourevitch is honest when he says at one point that he “didn’t see any great hope in the eyes of the people I visited” (Gourevitch 2009a:42). And it is true that survivors do tell him that life in Rwanda is better than it was twelve years ago. But life twelve years earlier had consisted of the apocalypse. And his informants also add that “economically, it was better before ’94” (2009a:42). Gourevitch raises this issue during his talk with Rwarakabije, the former military commander in the Rwandan army under the previous regime of President Habyarimana, who later headed the armed rebellion against the new regime but then joined the new Rwandan national army. But when asked whether life today is better than it was before the genocide,

Rwarakabije does not even respond. Indeed, Gourevitch finds evidence that the sentiments behind the 1994 violence are still present, and that a large part of the population does not feel liberated by the military overthrow of the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) in 1994. On the contrary, many suggest that they look forward to a liberation *from* the RPF, not *by* the RPF.

Gourevitch mentions accusations lodged again Rwarakabije by a survivor who accuses him of participation in the genocide; these charges, expressed during a commemoration ceremony attended by the president and other dignitaries, are probably well-founded. Kagame himself admits that Rwarakabije escaped prosecution in the postgenocide justice system and that for reasons of expediency he was instead recycled into the new regime. Transitional justice, in this way, is a politicized process; respect for survivors is overridden by questions of power. Yet if ordinary Hutu acted with that kind of disrespect, they would be accused of the crime of perpetuating “genocide ideology” (Republic of Rwanda 2006a).<sup>5</sup> Gourevitch, however, fails to ask the large questions: Why is the justice system unable to change the protected status of people who are currently in the grace of the regime? What does this reveal about the entire justice system in Rwanda? Doesn’t this attitude and approach explain the sentiments expressed by people in the countryside? To answer these questions, however, Gourevitch would have had to move away imaginatively and intellectually from the center of society where knowledge on Rwanda is constructed. He would have had to question what is immediately visible and start searching for the actual meaning and direction of Rwandan life after genocide.

### **Understanding Justice, Governance, and Development in Rwanda: A Difficult Exercise**

In all likelihood, the reason that Gourevitch fails to ask these questions is not only because of unwillingness. It is also the result of factors that make it difficult for many people to understand the meaning of life after genocide. Indeed, the tension we see in Gourevitch’s work can be observed by comparing a number of studies on Rwanda. After the consolidation of the political transition in the 2003 presidential elections, Reyntjens reported on “cosmetic operations for international consumption” in the context of what actually was a dictatorship and “a fertile breeding ground for structural violence” (2004:210). Stephen Kinzer (2008), by contrast, found in post-genocide Rwanda and the leadership of Paul Kagame an entirely opposite situation: not a closed and repressive regime, but rather visionary leadership fully equipped to pull the country out of poverty in a generation or so. Similarly, World Bank researchers, noting in 2003 that “considerable progress has been achieved over the last ten years in a range of areas” (2004:1), anticipated a macro-level economic recovery and concluded that “social indicators are clearly improving for Rwanda’s next generation” (World Bank 2004:1). An Ansoms (2008), however, questioned whether this better fu-

ture for Rwanda's next generation would also include the rural poor, since growth policies are less pro-poor than the rhetoric suggests, and survey results reveal growing inequality since 2002 (Republic of Rwanda 2006).

The postgenocide Rwandan way of dealing with the past, and the Gacaca process in particular, has received wide attention as well, often with the same diverging analysis. The World Bank report (2004) refers to significant steps forward in the domain of reconciliation and asserts that the Gacaca court system has been "instrumental in advancing reconciliation and accountability following the genocide." Some argue that the Gacaca process not only fosters reconciliation, but also initiates a democratic culture of deliberation and dialogue (Wierzyńska 2004). Others, however, see Gacaca as "an exercise in victor's justice, coercing participation, restricting freedom of speech on sensitive subjects, and collectivizing guilt" (Waldorf 2006:85). While a minister in 2007 claimed that 75 percent of Rwandans are reconciled (*New Times*, April 12, 2007), others dismiss the reconciliation process, stating that postgenocide justice in Rwanda consists of a return to feudal structures and subordination for the Hutu (Centre de lutte contre l'impunité et l'injustice au Rwanda 2005). In a more recent discussion on the nature of the Rwandan justice system, Human Rights Watch concluded after three years of research that it operates in a political context that is detrimental to fair trial guarantees and that "there is an official antipathy to views diverging from those of the government and the dominant party" (Human Rights Watch 2008:2). William Shabas, however, who undertook the same exercise, refutes most of the claims by Human Rights Watch and summarized certain perspectives on Rwanda as "unrealistic assessments of problems that are more imaginary than real" (Shabas 2008:59).

Considering these divergent accounts, one almost wonders whether these observers are looking at the same country. The lack of consensus signals an apparent difficulty, if not impossibility, in separating image from reality and distinguishing the imaginary from the real, even in well-researched reports and scientific writings. As with the tensions in Gourevitch's text on the life after genocide, the question is: why?

### The "Scientific" Construction of Knowledge: Four Examples

In some cases, the differences in understanding Rwanda and the conclusions about the achievements in the postgenocide period can be attributed to a politically motivated, hidden agenda that necessitates twisting the evidence or being selective in the sources. An example is the pseudoscientific document presented by the new "Friends of Rwanda" (Friends of Rwanda n.d.), which minimizes the problems in important issues of governance and rationalizes the nature and scale of the violence and human rights abuses committed by the RPF. The previous regime also has its friends, who are equally selective in their sources and equally biased in their reading of history. Some deliberately minimize what happened in Rwanda in 1994, are

equivocal on the locus of responsibility for the 1994 carnage, and fail to acknowledge the improvements since the years of total destruction (see, e.g., Péan 2005). Such documents, of course, are easily unmasked as motivated and biased. But even fact-finding reports—including those derived from large-scale research projects carried out with scientifically sound procedures—often give rise to controversy and receive an almost standardized denial when conclusions are not in line with official discourse (see Pottier 2004; *New Times* 2008).<sup>6</sup> Deniability is more difficult in these cases, and the intervention is more complex, but the result is similar.

A major problem is that despite the “explosion of writing on this hitherto almost unknown country” that has been produced since mid-1994 (Uvin 2001:76), studies of Rwanda and the genocide have been primarily “top-down.” Because of its dramatic history and almost mediagenic qualities, Rwanda is highly “popular” with researchers, compared to, for example, neighboring Burundi. The relative regime stability, the good security situation (the absence of war and other forms of physical violence), and the efficient administrative structures constitute necessary prerequisites for most research activities, and Rwanda has become almost a research haven, often for graduate students. Yet the knife cuts both ways. The fact that the state apparatus functions as a well-oiled machine results in the omnipresence of its ears and eyes and substantial control over what can and cannot be studied. Large-scale research projects of all sorts exist, but what is lacking is local-level research and analysis of the micro-level processes at work in smaller communities (Uvin 2001:97–98; see also Longman 2004).

The following four cases provide examples of the problems noted above. The first two are well known, as the findings, albeit refuted, were made public; in the latter two cases, interference occurred before the results were published and the research findings were never released.

### *The United Nations World Food Program (WFP)*

In the first months of 2006, a famine struck the food-producing region of Bugesera, located in northern Burundi and southern Rwanda. The World Food Program issued a report with alarming figures based on its own research (*Panapress* 2006a). At the time, I was undertaking field research in villages located in that part of Rwanda, so I had first-hand evidence that hunger was rife among the population and that some people had resorted to eating grass and weeds. The Burundian government acknowledged the problem, requested assistance from international aid agencies, and urged Burundians to help their fellow compatriots in need (*Panapress* 2006b). But even though this is an agricultural and climatic zone shared by both countries, the response of Rwandan officials was to refute the claims and to argue that the data were incorrect (*New Times* 2006). A report by the International Federation of the Red Cross released only in 2007 revealed that the Red Cross had launched an emergency appeal in 2006 to assist

vulnerable families and that eventually food distribution did take place. It seems clear that the Rwandan officials initially denied the report and the existence of hunger not because they believed the data were incorrect, but because the data contradicted the vision they were promoting both internally and externally: of a hearty, self-sufficient country experiencing progress and development.<sup>7</sup>

### *The United Nations Development Program (UNDP)*

The Human Development Report issued in 2007 by the UNDP entitled *Turning Vision 2020 into Reality: From Recovery to Sustainable Human Development* acknowledged that Rwanda has experienced substantial growth since the end of the genocide. The report also states that the global Millennium Development Goals or the Rwandan equivalent (“Vision 2020”) might well be reached in the future. At the same time, the report identified some serious shortcomings and crucial challenges, including a rise in absolute poverty and inequality levels, and the need for greater investment in the agricultural sector. In addition, it claimed that the quality of governance and depth of democracy needed to be improved to guarantee long-term stability. This report was not accepted by the Rwandan cabinet. The minister in charge of economy was asked to refute it and he promptly did so, even after having written the introduction to the report himself. The UNDP was also pressured to release a statement saying that the report contained unfounded and misleading information and that the lead researchers—a Rwandan and foreign national—were henceforth “blacklisted” (*New Times* 2007b).

### *The National Unity and Reconciliation Commission (NURC)*

For several years the Rwandan National Unity and Reconciliation Commission has been undertaking large-scale surveys on factors affecting social cohesion and reconciliation. This work has been carried out through a specialized international NGO and is financed by important donors. As the results of initial surveys became available after some time, the study design was adapted in such a way that longer-term changes could be identified concerning specific themes and topics in the research. However, since the start of the Gacaca activities nationwide in 2005, the survey results have stopped being disseminated to a wider audience. The official reason for withholding the findings is that the commission wishes to collect the results from several years into one volume, with the aim of producing a more comprehensive overview. Nevertheless, one unauthorized version of the report has been circulating in diplomatic circles, and its content—a highly critical assessment of the impact of Gacaca activities on social cohesion and reconciliation in Rwanda in 2005–2006—suggests that the delay was likely occasioned by the nature of the findings. That is, the report contradicts the



dominant, government-promoted discourse on the Gacaca process (Republic of Rwanda 2007). In the same period a government minister referred to encouraging statistics, asserting that 75 percent of the population had become reconciled (*New Times* 2007a). Eventually an official report was made public in 2008, probably because the existence (although not most of the contents) of these survey results had become known. Increasing requests by donors interested in social developments in the country and NGOs working in the domain of reconciliation also necessitated the release of the findings. The report (Republic of Rwanda 2008) outlines the main results already revealed in the previous unauthorized version, and apart from some positive developments related to specific themes, it presents an overall bleak picture of the impact of the Gacaca process on social cohesion. Its release was not widely publicized, however, and it went unnoticed by a wider audience.

Importantly, the report concludes with the assertion that “it is important for analysts and policy-makers to properly ‘read’ these sentiments, [and] triangulate them with other information or data that this survey cannot provide” (Republic of Rwanda 2008:79). A footnote suggests that qualitative individual interviews or focus groups could provide especially important additional insights. This is a strange suggestion, since such efforts had been undertaken in 2006 by the same NURC in order to better understand the quantitative results.<sup>8</sup> However, the remark becomes meaningful when one considers that the findings were not made public because of ideological or political reasons. The results of the qualitative research provided useful insights into the reasons for some unexplored tendencies and unexpected negative opinions by survivors or prisoners. Narratives from the qualitative research provided information about the reasons that 80 percent of respondents questioned the veracity of testimonies in Gacaca in the 2006 survey. Yet a government official responded that the findings gathered during these focus group discussions, which elucidated why people did not believe that the truth was surfacing in the Gacaca activities, were irrelevant.<sup>9</sup> The findings of these group discussions were never made public.

### ***The World Bank***

In 2005 the World Bank embarked on a heavily financed and innovative multicountry study of micro-level and longitudinal determinants of movements out of poverty. The idea was to replicate the research design and methodology across different countries and thus to allow for cross-country comparisons. Rwanda was one of the countries selected for the research, along with Tanzania, Uganda, Senegal, Mexico, India, Afghanistan, China, and some others.<sup>10</sup> An underlying goal of this research was to explore the “expansion of freedoms” as elucidated by Amartya Sen (1999), the exercise of basic rights, and the success or failure of democratic institutions in different countries. In Rwanda, the study employed survey techniques that captured and compared longitudinal data from before the genocide and

from 2005. It was also based on qualitative interviews and observations of participatory decision-making at local and national levels. After six months of study and the collection of hundreds of survey questionnaires and responses from numerous primary data sources, the Rwandan security forces seized at least half of the data on the pretext that “genocide ideology” lurked in the research design and study content.<sup>11</sup> Rwandan participants were questioned by the police, and foreign researchers implementing the study were summoned by the Criminal Investigations Department (CID). After a long period of negotiation between high-level World Bank representatives and several Rwandan ministers and other government officials, the decision was taken to destroy all the data and abandon the research project altogether. It was clear that the results of the research could be harmful for the Rwandan establishment, since questions about democracy and freedom were central to the study, while the longitudinal design made a comparison between pre- and postgenocide Rwanda possible. Apparently, this was seen as undesirable for fear of unfavorable comparisons. The raw data were never analyzed.

### The Aesthetics of Progress

The above examples uncover the politicized nature of research in Rwanda, both in terms of what the government itself produces and what it allows respected international organizations to produce. This ideological control over the discourse is not limited to official documents, however, as we saw in the case of Phillip Gourevitch. It extends to a more subtle control over the reports written by journalists and other eye-witnesses presenting first-person accounts. In his book *A Thousand Hills*, Stephen Kinzer claims that “the Rwanda that foreigners who live there see is the real one” (2008:331). But a close examination of his work reveals that he did not speak with ordinary Rwandans, and in fact, that he mostly speaks *for* them in the book (see Thomson 2009b:196). His account is based on what he saw and heard, but most of his conversations took place in the urban and posh environment of the Hotel Des Milles Collines in the capital of Kigali, and most of his interlocutors were either other foreigners or members of the Rwandan elite. Indeed, most Rwandan observers and foreigners working in the country are reluctant to leave the beaten track and never really cross the rural–urban divide. The occasional visitor is even more confined to the urban sphere, often gleaning only superficial, snapshot impressions of what lies beyond the capital city. Thus there is an urban bias in the understanding of Rwanda. In fact, a global assessment of the working of the Department of International Development (DFID), the agency representing the United Kingdom (Rwanda’s biggest donor), reveals that compared with all other DFID employees in the world, the staff members stationed in Rwanda spend the fewest number of working days in rural areas outside the capital station—only one day a year (National Audit Office 2007:27).<sup>12</sup> (They are tied only with

the staff working in Afghanistan, where there are undoubtedly good reasons to avoid the countryside.) The auditor recommends the conducting of regular “reality checks” in all locations where DFID is present in order to understand how its programs are affecting poor peoples’ lives.

Yet even with effort and the best of intentions, such a “reality check” is hard to accomplish in Rwanda. For even if one ventures into the countryside, one is faced with the national ideology and vision of progress as it has been translated onto the local level. The national discourse, in other words, is controlled not just by active censorship and coercion, but also by subtle manipulations of image and perception.<sup>13</sup> Table 1, for example, details a proposal from a district mayor enumerating a range of forbidden or compulsory activities and the concomitant fines that would be imposed for infractions. These would include such “crimes” as consulting a traditional healer without authorization, refusing to use a modern cooking stove, lacking a table in one’s home for the storage of cooking utensils, or appearing in public with soiled clothing or evidence of inadequate personal hygiene.

Undoubtedly, at least one of the underlying objectives of the proposed measures is laudable: increasing the standards of health and hygiene in the country. However, the result would be that a significant number of rural dwellers might look less poor and “traditional,” but would be and feel as poor, or even poorer than, before.<sup>14</sup> For example, a current policy directive throughout the country mandates the wearing of shoes in public. Not wearing shoes means exclusion from public places such as markets and being turned away from official government functions. Yet peasants often do not have the financial means to adhere to this rule, and sometimes end up in the local *cachot* (jail) as a result. Obligatory fines of 10,000 Rwandan francs are not adjusted to the circumstances of rural life, and thus the only strategy for regaining freedom is to borrow money from family and friends, resulting in debt and more poverty. Another strategy is to follow the spirit, if not the letter, of the policy and participate in the project of image control. During fieldwork we noticed men and women walking to official gatherings and carrying their shoes on their heads. The purchase of new shoes as required by official policy had represented a serious investment, and these possessions had to be handled with care. Only when approaching the area where government officials were located (sometimes in the company of foreign visitors inspecting a “project” or some other “developmental” initiative) would they put on their shoes. Then, after the meeting and out of sight of the eyes of the state and the foreigners, the shoes would be removed and placed back on the head.

### The Ethics of Dissimulation

The official control over the aesthetics of display means that the images of progress that one sees in Rwanda—either while roaming the central boulevards of Kigali or visiting a “project” in the provincial towns of Gisenyi or

**Table 1. System of Fines**

	<b>Forbidden or Compulsory Activity</b>	<b>FINE (RWF)</b>
1	Tending livestock on "public places"	10.000
2	Cultivating on riverbeds	10.000
3	Refusal to dig anti-erosion canals	10.000
4	Absence of roof gutter and receptacle near house	10.000
5	"Having" a second wife	10.000
6	Churches without chapel (building)	10.000
7	Religious groups praying at night	10.000
8	Refusal to participate in nocturnal security patrols	10.000
9	Parents who refuse to send children to school	10.000
10	Teacher or other person sending child from school for not paying tuition fee	10.000
11	Consulting traditional "healer" without authorization	10.000
12	Cutting trees without permission	10.000
13	Heating wood to fabricate charcoal	10.000
14	Selling wood products without authorization	10.000
15	Refusal to make/use a "modern cooking stove"	10.000
16	Selling home made products like cheese, milk, etc, without authorization	10.000
17	House without compost bin	2.000
18	House without clothesline	2.000
19	House without closed toilet	2.000
20	House without table to put cooking utensils	2.000
21	House without conservation place for drinking water	2.000
22	Someone without clean clothing & body hygiene	2.000
23	Teacher without clean clothing & body hygiene	10.000
24	Consumption of beers in cabarets or at home with straw	10.000
25	Commercial centre without toilet	10.000
26	Restaurant without toilets or not clean	10.000
27	School compound not clean	10.000
28	Health centre without hygiene	10.000
29	Market with no toilets and/or not clean	10.000

Source: Letter from a district mayor addressed to the executive secretaries at the sector level (fieldwork observation, Northern Province, June 2006)

Butare—turn out to be superficial and misleading. Even a longer residence in rural Rwanda devoted to collecting "stories," seeing things from a bottom-up perspective, and going beyond official discourse and window-dressing is likely to present its own difficulties. The same ideological framework that represents the public face of the government has been widely propagated in the countryside by awareness campaigns and during meetings with authorities and military commanders. This has established a far-reaching practice of self-censorship among the population with regard to elements

that do not fit into the official public transcript. Official policy not only controls the hygiene of bodies, but also the hygiene of minds. Although this may in some sense be a legitimate goal considering the hate campaign that engulfed the country in the beginning of the 1990s, the policies of “re-education” also involve a considerable degree of “political indoctrination” (Mgbako 2005).

When Danielle de Lame conducted fieldwork in Rwanda in the late 1980s, she noticed that all public gatherings—whether festive religious events, ritualized public drinking activities, or “politico-private” gatherings—“serve to transmit meaning, provide the instruments of memorization, and create *consensus*” (2005:303). What she saw as a cultural predilection for consensus was of course encouraged and enhanced after the 1994 genocide as part of the massive effort to restore order and maintain security. Sensitization campaigns, commemoration ceremonies, speeches by dignitaries, and reeducation programs—the so-called *Ingando* and *Itorero*—are intended not only to eradicate “genocide ideology,” but also to promote a specific image of Rwanda.<sup>15</sup> These efforts to control people’s thoughts are not only taking place on specific occasions but have become a continuous process. The weekly *Umuganda* communal labor activities, for example, are carried out at the local level, but they conclude with a speech delivered by centrally appointed leaders on a theme chosen by the government and published in the official gazette. All of these activities have naturally instilled a high degree of self-censorship among the Rwandan peasant population.<sup>16</sup>

There are several components of this “rehearsed consensus.” To begin with, there is the notion of “Rwandanicity” or “Rwandanness,” which asserts that before the arrival of colonialism Rwandans were one unified people (Republic of Rwanda 2006a:167–85). According to this narrative, the colonial powers divided what had been a harmonious and egalitarian society into different ethnic groups in order to rule on the basis of these divisions. And these divisions, in turn, were the starting point for the genocide that culminated in the 1994 mass slaughter of Tutsi. A second component consists of praise for the activities of the RPF, which (according to the narrative) stopped this divisionism in its deadly manifestations during the actual killings, and continues to do so through its policies in the postgenocide period. The RPF abolished ethnicity and created one big family (*umuryango*) for all Rwandans. A third component consists of warnings about the alarming persistence of “genocide ideology” both inside and outside Rwanda and the need to eradicate it. According to this line of thinking, guidance from within the liberation movement of the RPF is necessary to fully embrace the restored order of “Rwandanicity,” free from the perils of ethnicity and the whims of dictatorship.

This “rehearsed consensus” is the dominant and dominating discourse in postgenocide Rwanda, but it is not necessarily what Rwandans experience as reality. In addition, just as de Lame noticed a cultural affinity for consensus (or the appearance of consensus) among Rwandans, an under-

standing of the cultural conception of *ubwenge* is necessary to fully appreciate the nature of their interactions and communication (see de Lame 2004; Rukebasha 1985; Overdulse 1997; Ntampaka 1999; Lestrade 1972; Crepeau 1985).<sup>17</sup> This complex notion incorporates a range of elements, though in the broadest sense, it refers to a valorization of the kind of intelligence that results in public self-control. *Ubwenge* is both an overall principle structuring behavior and display, and also a specific way of communicating. In the traditional organization of Rwandan society, speech acts did not correspond to reality alone, and what one said did not necessarily correspond with what one thought. Subtle adjustments could be made according to the status differential between the interlocutors or other variables in the broader sociopolitical environment. Language was thus a means to an end, not an end in itself. From a Western perspective, the latter would be the truth and the former a lie. But in the Rwandan context, truth and lies existed, and still exist, in a dialectical relationship. The Rwandan system of communication was (and is) esoteric: statements reveal and conceal at the same time. Often, outsiders to Rwandan culture fail to take this into account.

## Conclusion

Any attempt to understand postgenocide Rwanda needs to take into account the “mise-en-scène” analyzed in this article. The existence of active interference in the scientific construction of knowledge implies that even the reports one reads in the offices of Kigali and Washington, London, Brussels, Copenhagen, or other capitals around the globe are not always complete or accurate. As Pottier observed (2002:207), “reality is what Rwanda’s political leaders, as moral guardians tell the world . . . it is.” The Rwandan establishment operating at the center of society is crafting a preferred image of the country.<sup>18</sup> As we have seen, it actively pursues this objective in various ways through the active interference in scientific research projects, through the cultivation of an aesthetics of progress, and through the subtle use of a complex communication code.

Future attempts to generate insights into postgenocide Rwanda require innovative approaches if they are to produce useful results. In Rwanda there is a second world lying beyond political control or correctness, beyond “rehearsed consensus” and the “mise-en-scène.” This second world comes to the surface only during “rare moments of political electricity when...the hidden transcript is spoken directly and publicly in the teeth of power” (Scott 1990:14). In the absence of such events, one has to search for an interpretation of the “cryptic and opaque” (Scott 1990:137). One has to move beyond appearances and toward the meaning of life in the periphery of Rwandan society. Moving away from the center, both physically and mentally, is thus an important strategy. It is a difficult, but necessary, exercise.

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## Notes

1. See also conversation between Gourevitch and the editor of *The New Yorker* at [www.newyorker.com/online/2009/05/04/090504on\\_audio\\_gourevitch](http://www.newyorker.com/online/2009/05/04/090504on_audio_gourevitch).
2. Also see Scott Straus's comparative essay (2000) on the books by Gourevitch

- and Alison Des Forges (1999) on Rwanda.
3. Although Gourevitch did cross the rural–urban divide, his trip into the countryside consisted of occasional visits to a limited number of localities and only a few interviews. In addition, his actual interview procedures may have been problematic. At one point Gourevitch’s translator replies to a statement of Girumuhate with the comment “yeah, they all say that.” If this intervention took place in the presence of the interlocutor it is, of course, unacceptable, since it would likely influence the respondent’s perception of the interviewer and the answers he was expected to give.
  4. In the op-ed piece, Gourevitch talks specifically about the inadequacy of photojournalism as a record of reality: “Crime-scene photographs, for all their power to reveal, can also serve as a distraction, even a deterrent, from precise understanding of the events they depict. Photographs cannot show us a chain of command, or . . . decision making. Photographs cannot tell stories. They can only provide evidence of stories, and evidence is mute: it demands investigation and interpretation” (2009b:10). I would like to thank David Newbury for bringing this op-ed piece to my attention, as well for suggesting the analogy between photographs and “snapshot” narrative portraits.
  5. Footnotes 5–7 in the report (p. 17) give concrete examples of instances of “genocide ideology” and reveal its conceptually wide-ranging scope.
  6. This article focuses on scientific research, although freedom of the press is also under pressure in Rwanda. See Waldorf (2007). One also has to take into account that one needs to have permission from the relevant governmental bodies to conduct field research in Rwanda. Therefore, certain research activities are never undertaken or are adapted so that their predicted outcomes will be in line with the official policy and “vision.” Apart from the examples referred to here involving international (research) institutions, several examples can be cited of researchers who in the context of academic research ran into serious trouble with the Rwandan authorities, especially while doing research with “ordinary people” in the countryside. One researcher was forced to undergo a “reeducation” tour after presenting the preliminary results of her findings. See Thomson (2009a).
  7. Filip Reyntjens (2007:6) refers to this way of handling things as “a characteristic of dictatorships more interested in their international image than the survival of their population” (translation by the author).
  8. Author’s interview with a Rwandan field researcher who was part of the “qualitative” research group and study. The qualitative study and the existence of the results were confirmed by an official of the National Service of the Gacaca courts (interview, Kigali, April 2007). A field guide containing the questions used during focus group discussions is on file with the author.
  9. Interview with official of the National Service of the Gacaca Courts, Kigali, April 2007.
  10. I was employed as a long-term consultant for the World Bank and stationed in Rwanda at the time. Together with two other foreign researchers, I was supervising the design and implementation of the study and the fieldwork activities in the Rwandan countryside.
  11. Initially, police officers and other security agents had placed a significant number of the enumerators and employees of the logistical partner under surveillance and seized all the data in their possession. During negotiations between

the World Bank and the Rwandan authorities, half of the data were in the possession of the security forces and half of the data remained in the possession of the World Bank. Eventually, the study was terminated by the government of Rwanda after an agreement with the World Bank management. All data were jointly destroyed after the negotiations.

12. A similar observation was made in an evaluation of the 2000–2005 DFID country program in Rwanda, which was characterized as “insufficiently informed about implementation realities on the ground” (DFID Evaluation report EV660, cited in Holvoet & Rombouts 2008:592).
13. Because local authorities are appointed, the chain of accountability goes upward toward higher authorities and not downward to the population. As a result, local administrative personnel implement orders received from the central government in Kigali. On the nature of the local government structure and the experience of political representation, see Ingelaere (2007a:36–41; 2010).
14. This theme is further developed in Ansoms (2009). The engineering aspect of the Rwandan postgenocide regime is also documented in my description (Ingelaere 2006:29–91) of rural life on one hill in central Rwanda.
15. For a detailed discussion of this ideological framework and the search for the “truth” during the Gacaca activities, see Ingelaere (2009).
16. The Kinyarwanda word *Kwibwizira* refers to this practice of autocensorship. It expresses the idea that people do what authorities want them to do without explicit instruction or coercion.
17. This perception also is based on my own field experience and information gathered during fieldwork.
18. An example is the comment made by the Rwandan governor of the southern province on the (illegal) deportation from Burundi of Rwandans seeking refugee status there; the presence of these people in Burundi,” he said, “was damaging the image of Rwanda ...” (Human Rights Watch 2009).