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## Performing the Nation: Theatre in Post-Genocide Rwanda

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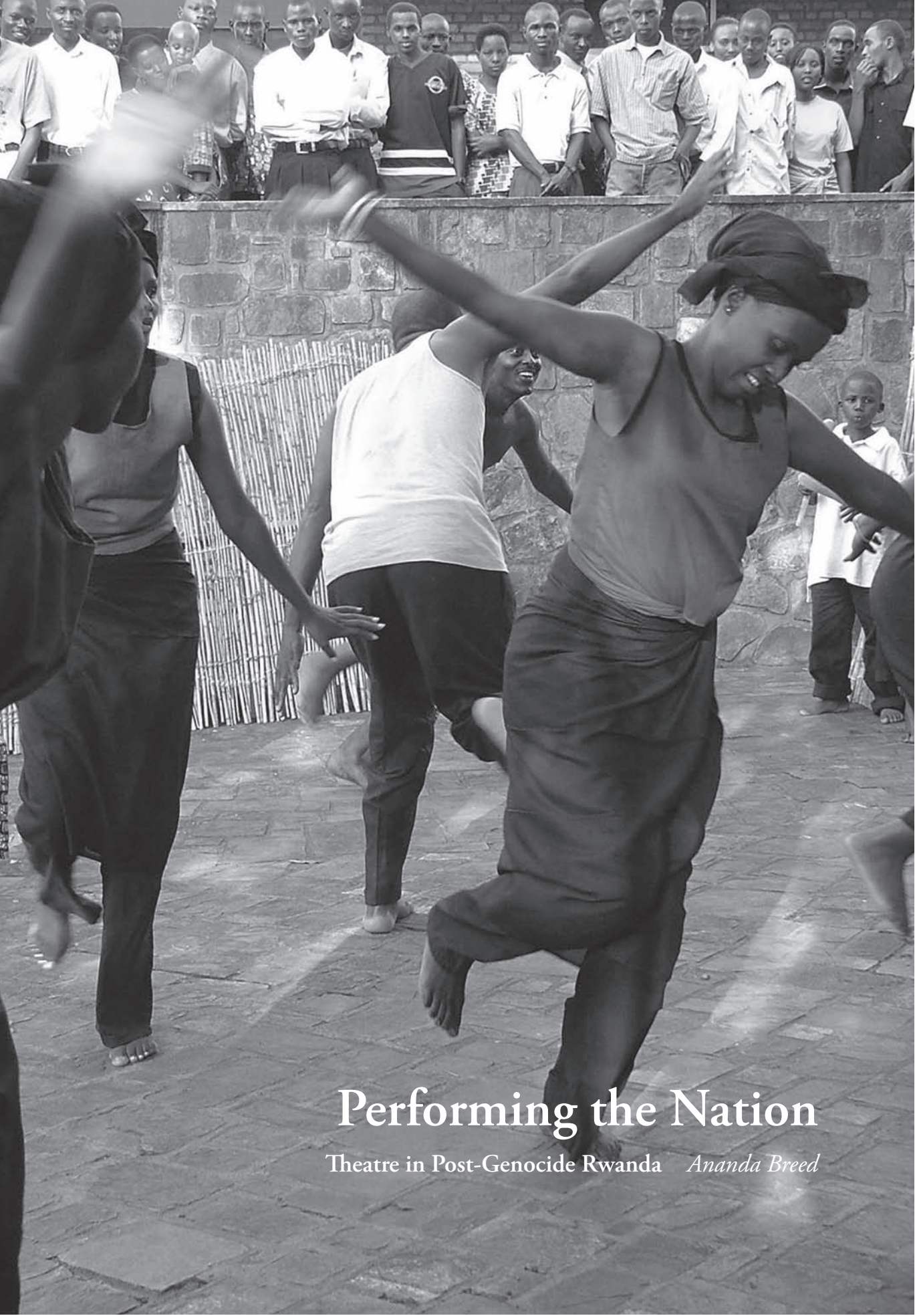
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# Performing the Nation

Theatre in Post-Genocide Rwanda *Ananda Breed*

## Introduction

*If the ambivalent figure of the nation is a problem of its transitional history, its conceptual indeterminacy, its wavering between vocabularies, then what effect does this have on narratives and discourses that signify a sense of “nationness” [...].*

—Homi K. Bhabha (1990:2)

Theatre in Rwanda is a tool for nation building in the aftermath of genocide. The narrative of a re-imagined identity for the country is performed on a national level through government-sanctioned theatre companies and what I refer to as the rewriting history project, and on a community level through grassroots associations. I will explore the performance of nation building in three arenas including legendary theatre, the rewriting history project, and grassroots associations.

In its most altruistic form, theatre provides a space for perpetrators and survivors to weave new relationships. For example, in an interview with members of the grassroots association Umuhanzi w'u Rwanda (The Poetry of Rwanda), a survivor of the genocide held a baby who suckled her breast. Indicating the man sitting next to her, she said, “When I do theatre, I forget that this brother here killed my five children” (2005). While grassroots theatre may bring together perpetrators and survivors, it can also be used to perform nationalism. Grassroots theatre embodies nationalist slogans of reconciliation through text, song, and dance proclaiming that Rwanda is one culture with the same language.<sup>1</sup> Although the use of theatre contributes to individual cases of reconciliation, it can also create dilemmas that impede large-scale or general reconciliation. There are two dynamics at play: reconciliation for its own sake, and a nationalist reconciliation promoting the government’s concept of unity—with the latter not necessarily wholly altruistic.

What I am calling “legendary theatre”<sup>2</sup> performs nationhood through cultural forms that are inherently politicized. Likewise, traditional dance and the gacaca courts perform nationhood through the re-imagining of cultural forms which are used to promote the unified Rwandan

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1. The identity of a unified Rwanda, in which all citizens are one, is constructed under the new Government of National Unity devoid of the former ethnic labels Hutu, Tutsi, and Twa.
  2. I coined this term to best describe theatre that performs the Webster dictionary definition of “legend”: (1) a non-historical or unverifiable story handed down by tradition from earlier times and popularly accepted as historical; (2) the body of stories of this kind, esp. as they relate to a particular people, group, or clan.

*Figure 1. (facing page) Iryo Nabonye ends with a message of hope. The Kigali Institute for Education in Kigali, Rwanda, 16 January 2005. (Photo by Kevin Green)*

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identity.<sup>3</sup> The reinvented gacaca was established to deliver justice to 120,000 perpetrators imprisoned since 1994, while also serving as a restorative device for reconciliation in the larger community. The term “gacaca” is a Kinyarwanda word meaning “a grassy place” and refers to a precolonial form of justice in which opposing families sat on the grass as the community mediated the conflict. The National Service of Gacaca Courts defines gacaca as:

an institution inspired by Rwandan culture, charged with managing and resolving family conflicts. Rwandan people used to sit together on the grass *agacaca* to settle disputes with openness of mind and to reconcile the protagonists without taking sides in the matter. As the saying goes in Kinyarwanda, *Ukiza abavandimwe arararama*, literally meaning, “to settle brotherly disputes, you must put aside your family ties.” (2005a)

The gacaca is a reinvented justice system used to try the perpetrators of the genocide. Explicitly, the crimes judged are those committed as part of the effort to exterminate a race.

Cultural systems build nationalism. This is especially true with the rewriting of history through the reworking of tradition and a mythmaking that creates an imagined precolonial unified nation of peoples who share the same culture, the same dances, and the same language.

## Legendary Theatre

*For the nation, as a form of cultural elaboration (in the Gramscian sense), is an agency of ambivalent narration that holds culture at its most productive position, as a force for subordination, fracturing, diffusing, reproducing, as much as producing, creating, forcing, guiding.*

—Homi K. Bhabha (1990:3)

Legendary theatre refers to theatre companies and performances that have a national viewership under the auspices of the government. Specifically, I consider Kalisa Rugano’s Mutabaruka<sup>4</sup> and Hope Azeda’s Mashirika theatre companies. Both companies are directed by returned refugees and use theatre as a tool to construct national identity and history. Rugano, an exile, employed theatre in neighboring Burundi as an instrument to resurrect/construct the identity of a precolonial Rwanda and to enlist Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) support to return to the motherland; Azeda employed theatre to reconcile the Hutu, Tutsi, and Twa, as seen in her production *The Firestones of Sebutsitwa*, performed in Rwanda after her return from Uganda in 1998, following the genocide. The political and social problem of staging nationalism and reconciliation by referring to a precolonial unified past is that there are opposing narratives: one Hutu and the other Tutsi. In legendary theatre productions, the reign of the Tutsi monarchy is glorified. In this way, despite government dissension regarding the use of the terms Tutsi, Hutu, and Twa, government-sponsored legendary theatre productions inadvertently emphasize and perform ethnic differences.

### Mutabaruka’s *Umukino w’Umuganura*

The staging of Mutabaruka’s *Umukino w’Umuganura* (The Performance of the First Harvest) took place at the luxurious Intercontinental Hotel in Kigali, Rwanda’s capital, on 5 August 2005.

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3. While the current government claims all of Rwanda shares one culture, there are differences in the dance styles. At a cultural performance in the Kigali Central Prison, I was explicitly told the differences among the various dance styles being performed and the regions they originated from.

The Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) war crimes are not tried in the gacaca courts, thus there is an implicit division of ethnicity enacted through the performance of the gacaca courts nationally, although the government rhetoric is that there is no division between Hutu, Tutsi, and Twa.

4. The word “mutabaruka” signifies a person who has survived a war. When that person produces a child, especially a son, the child is named Mutabaruka. The term can also be applied to someone who has gone on a journey far from home and stays longer; when he comes back and produces a son, that child can also be called Mutabaruka.

Director Rugano paced back and forth at the periphery of the audience, occasionally delivering poetic phrases from wherever he stood, accenting the traditional Intore dance with political messages and slogans of development. Other actors were planted in the audience, echoing some of the pro-Tutsi sentiments, such as: “In October, the thunder of the RPF (Rwandan Patriotic Front) broke from Kagitumba. They stopped the genocide while other countries were watching”; “Economically, base the country on one’s own natural resources, do not become dependant on the international community and foreign exchange”; “When we call for foreign help, it is like clinging to a serpent”; and, “Who told you God lives in heaven? What if you find that God lives in the hearts of people?”

Attending the performance were the mayor of Kigali and his wife, the executive director of the gacaca courts, and several government ministers. A brown gourd filled with sorghum beer was passed among the audience members, recalling the traditional practice of sharing beer as a symbol of national unity. As part of the performance, the National Ballet of Rwanda, costumed in the national flag’s colors of blue, green, and yellow, staged a legendary tale of Rwandan heroes. Reflecting the practice of traditional Intore dancers who performed in the king’s court, the dancers spread their hands up and over their heads, mimicking the horns of a cow. The dance is called *Umushagiriro* and compares the beauty of the cow with the beauty of women. The female dancers represent the walk of the cow, their chests held up and pushed forward, their arms above their heads, and their footwork patterns adjusting from side to side like a cow might when lumbering across the road in a herd. Other dances followed, such as the warrior dance, in which the male dancers hold spears and shields, their heads covered by wigs of long white grass, their feet clad in bells. The men occasionally break out into monologues of self-praise called *Icyivugo*, which are used to relay tales of heroism to the King. These monologues often praise acts of war, telling where a battle was fought and the number of people killed. In the background, a chorus sings in praise of Rwanda, the land of a thousand hills.

When asked about the performance, Rugano responded that it was to honor the RPF fighters who ended the genocide, and a personal tribute to the current leader, President Paul Kagame. The dance glorifies Rwanda, emphasizing how the Hutu, Tutsi, and Twa will fight together, united in the service of king and country.

Although the performance illustrates a unified culture, I spoke with a high-ranking government official who expanded on some of the contradictions between the rhetoric of unity and how cultural forms carry political histories. He explicitly stated that Mutabaruka’s performances were used as a cultural instrument of the exiled Tutsi:

Some people will say that there is no difference between the King and the President, just different words. The former regime wanted to change the culture, but they couldn’t. It is still in the language, it is still in the dance. It cannot be erased. The arts, especially those practices that were linked to pagan traditions, were repressed. The only dance allowed was the dance from the North [the area from which the former President originated]. But the diaspora continued to use the arts, still speaking Kinyarwanda and educating the children of Rwanda about the Rwandan culture. Even Kalisa Rugano was on the outside, but continued to do theatre illustrating the history of our country.

There was a play that Kalisa staged, which was about someone who was king and his kingdom was disappearing. The play encouraged people to fight for their rights to go back to their country. This play was influential in encouraging young people to join the RPF, especially in Burundi. (Anonymous 2005)

Alice Mukaka mirrors these sentiments in her paper “Revivifying Rituals as the Engine for Drama Development in Rwanda”:

For every exiled poet, every gesture was quite like a sensual and permanent quest for the country of their ancestors, which became mythic and imaginary. To get back to this

Rwanda, the “Land of a Thousand Hills,” is a land-locked nation in central Africa roughly the size of Massachusetts in the United States or Wales in the UK. The capital is Kigali. As of 2006, the population was 8.6 million and is projected to double by 2020. Even at its present numbers, Rwanda is Africa’s most densely populated nation with 321 persons per kilometer. Rwanda’s 12 provinces are divided by districts, then sectors, and finally cells comparable to state, county, city, and neighborhood divisions in the United States. The predominant language is Kinyarwanda, spoken by more than 99 percent of the population, followed by French (17.7 percent), Swahili (16 percent) and English (9.2 percent). In terms of religion, Rwanda’s people are predominantly Christian (93 percent), followed by Muslim (1.8 percent) and traditionalists/animists. Ethnically, Rwanda’s population before the genocide of 1994 was Hutu 84 percent, Tutsi 15 percent, and indigenous Twa 1 percent.

During the 100 days of slaughter, from April to July 1994, nearly one million people were massacred—most of them Tutsi. The genocide left 500,000 orphaned children and 400,000 widows. Over two million displaced persons fled to neighboring countries. Then in July 1994, the Tutsi-led Rwandan Patriot Front (RPF) invaded from Uganda, stopped the genocide, and established a government of national unity. Pasteur Bizimungu, a Hutu, became president, while the majority of cabinet posts were given to Tutsis. Bizimungu was overthrown in 2000 and replaced by Paul Kagame, a Tutsi and the RPF leader. In 2003, Kagame was elected to a five-year term, winning 95 percent of the vote, although his landslide victory was marked by irregularities.

The genocide has roots in the revolution of 1959 in which the Hutu majority overthrew the Tutsi-dominated government and monarchy. The 1990 to 1994 civil war was mediated by the international community, which resulted in the Arusha Peace Accords, under which a multiparty system came into existence. At that time, young Hutus formed the Interahamwe (literally, “we who attack together”), who were largely responsible for the slaughter. The genocide began after the plane carrying Rwandan president Juvenal Habyrimana, a Hutu, and Burundian president Cyprien Ntaryamira was shot down above Kigali airport on 6 April 1994.

connection, there was no other choice apart from working on the social memory, on the language memory, and on the memory of the culture. (2005)

In addition to Rugano, other theatre artists such as Hope Azeda, Aimable Twahartwa, Jean Marie Kayishema, and Jean Marie Rurangwa use theatre as a tool to evoke the past in recreating the future.

### **Mashirika’s *Rwanda My Hope***

Mashirika’s production of *Rwanda My Hope*, written and directed by Hope Azeda, is another work that emerged from the Rwandan diaspora. As Mukaka notes: “The past [...] is a guilty past whereas the reconciliation which was symbolized by the long-dreamt flag of unity should be reinvented” (2005). The key words, both in this sentence and in *Rwanda My Hope*, are “guilt,” “reconciliation,” and “reinvented.” Although the original production was developed in 2004 for the 10th commemoration of the genocide in Kigali, Rwanda, it has been resurrected for a 100-day tour as an instructional tool for education purposes by the UK-based genocide prevention institute, Aegis Trust. The play uses personal testimonies of survivors, including one given by a young boy who was born on 7 April 1994, the day that the genocide began, the day that the plane of President Habyrimana was shot down. “I was born on the 7th of April 1994. I love music and I love football, I love many things, but, BUT, I hate one thing and that is the day I was born” (Azeda 2005). The play was revamped to enlist donors who gathered for three performances given at three different schools: the Kigali Institute for Science and Technology (KIST), Green Hills Academy, a private school, and a secondary school near the Aegis Trust



*Figure 2. The association Ongera Urebe began in February of 1994 as a cultural troupe, but following the genocide has done theatre integrating community issues. They performed Ongera Urebe Ibyaye Nu Rwanda on 12 July 2005. In scenes of the gacaca court, the Interahamwe are tried for their crimes. The judge preaches reconciliation and the need to tell the truth. (Photo by Ananda Breed)*

memorial site in Murambi. Although the play *Rwanda My Hope* serves multiple purposes—including as a trigger for the memories of both survivors and perpetrators—it is also being directed towards the international community. The play is in English, although some passages are translated into Kinyarwanda, the official language of Rwanda. The audience at the secondary school gave an audible sigh after the delay in translating the young boy’s speech from English into Kinyarwanda. How much of the script containing testimonies of those who lived through the genocide was lost in translation?

The images depicted in the production of *Rwanda My Hope* are of women being raped, mobs beating individuals, and heads being smashed. The production was a living theatrical memorial to victims of these crimes. When Azeda was first approached to direct the production, she said that it had to be a dance of mourning. In rehearsals with over 1,000 performers, including 600 children, a 200-person choir, and 200 dancers, there were times when the memories of the genocide and the rehearsals of the genocide overlapped. As Azeda commented of the 10th-anniversary production, which was outdoors:

While rehearsing, it would rain. There is a scene in which the participants would have to fall flat on the ground, their bodies in the mud. The participants would complain, to which I would say that the rain and the genocide go together. That many times when bodies had been mutilated, covered with dirt to die, the rain would fall and revive people, bringing them back to life again. (2005a)



Figure 3. Scene from *Ongera Urebe Ibyaye Nu Rwanda* by the association *Ongera Urebe*, 12 July 2005. (Photo by Ananda Breed)

These images do not require words to be effective. But what kind of impact do they have? Several students rushed from the large community hall of the school near the Murambi memorial site, reportedly traumatized by the production. The performance was a reprimand for those responsible for the genocide, including the international community, yet its message reached different groups in different ways. At one moment in the play, the message was no longer aimed at the audience of several hundred schoolchildren, but at the group of foreign investors in the audience. A character in the play states:

Remembering the genocide for Rwanda is important for everyone, because the whole world knew and did not do anything to stop the genocide, so everyone around the world shares a little something in our little country of Rwanda. So it is better to remember than to forget, because if you do not remember, then you do not have all of the truth. (Azeda 2005b)

But who is remembering and who is forgetting? When the performance was staged at KIST, there were several questions and comments posed by the audience of resident students: “Why is the play primarily in English versus Kinyarwanda?”; “The play does not illustrate why the genocide happened”; “It seems that the information is outdated, it should have information about the current processes of gacaca.” From my perspective, *Rwanda My Hope* embodies the horrors of the genocide and triggers the guilt of the international community, but perhaps it does not interrogate some of the current issues facing Rwanda. However, the production does plan to integrate feedback from the performances to speak more directly to the people of Rwanda. The 100-day tour by Aegis Trust aspires to use *Rwanda My Hope* as a springboard for



youth to integrate their own testimonies and to reflect on how the genocide has affected them personally and as a nation. In this way, the play is still being rewritten and transformed for different local and international audiences.

## Rewriting History Project

*Forgetting, I would even go so far as to say historical error, is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation, which is why progress in historical studies often constitutes a danger for [the principle of] nationality. Indeed, historical enquiry brings to light deeds of violence which took place at the origin of all political formations, even of those whose consequences have been altogether beneficial. Unity is always effected by means of brutality [...].*

—Ernest Renan (1990:11)

History has not been taught in Rwandan schools since the 1994 genocide. Currently, the government of Rwanda is rewriting the lesson books in collaboration with the Human Rights Center at the University of California, Berkeley. The project is part of a methodological design called Facing History and Ourselves, which includes research consultants from Rwanda. The consultants are faculty at the National University of Rwanda, religious leaders, government officials, officers from NGO's, and playwrights (Gahima 2005). The historical events are argued and analyzed within several focus groups searching for common timelines that can be used to create a unified history to be taught in schools. According to Fatuma Ndangiza, the Executive Secretary of the National Unity and Reconciliation Commission, the genocide was the result of over 30 years of indoctrination using false information (Ndangiza 2005). Thus, the rewriting history project is a corrective, an attempt to teach the “real” history of Rwanda. Of course, the process of rewriting history can be problematic, in that usually during times of war there are multiple narratives in conflict. The victor is usually able to rewrite history into a singular narrative that dominates competing narratives.

A chief facilitator of the project, Dr. Deo Byanafashe, Dean of Arts and Humanities at the National University of Rwanda, considers the rewriting history project to be a careful means of both forgetting and remembering:

In order to forgive, you need to forget. That is our culture. Yet, due to the genocide, we must not forget. It is the careful forgetting and remembering, in this case, that will delineate what events are recorded or left off of the page. (2005)

Another government employee on the history writing committee states, “There are problems between how people see events, take 1959 for example. There are some on the committee who will state that 1959 was a revolution; others, that it was the start of the genocide” (Gahima, 2005). Contested memories are filtered through ideas concerning the monarchy, the republic, and the current government of Rwanda. The Hutus, who comprise over 85 percent of the population, generally view the overturn of the monarchy and Tutsi reign as a revolution. However, the Tutsi see things differently. According to Charles Gahima, the Director of the National Center for Curriculum Development (NURC), 1959 in Tutsi eyes is the beginning of the genocide. Gahima states:

Towards independence, when Tutsis also asked for independence, the Belgians wanted the Hutus to take over, which caused civil strife. Some people see it as self-emancipation, like the French Revolution. Others say, was it civil strife created by colonialists? The victims, Tutsi, don't see it as a revolution, but as instigated civil strife. The Hutus see it as a revolution. What exactly is it? Depending on who teaches history, if it is a Hutu, 1959 is a revolution. Yet, for there to be a revolution, there must be a fundamental change. Was there a fundamental change? What was it exactly? In 1972 many Tutsis were killed in Rwanda. Was this a revolution? Was 1994 a revolution? (2005)

In an initial draft of the history workbook for secondary schools titled *The Teaching of History for Rwanda: A Participatory Approach* (NCDC 2005b), there is an illustrative myth about Mutwale, a lion who rules without discord over his fertile land, the imagined territory of Turibo. Then an invading group of lions, headed by Kabutindi from the far off territory of Mahanga, tries to conquer the kingdom and change the subjects' culture. Mutwale refuses to change his culture, "to betray his culture, his own identity and that of his people." War follows brought by "the power and evil from Kabutindi" and Mutwale is sent into exile. At the end of the lesson, the schoolchildren are asked to: "Give some concrete examples drawn from real situations of the history of Rwanda which are inspired by the story." Clearly, this lesson teaches that the monarchy was a golden period of cohesion that was disrupted by outside forces. The story ends with the vacant throne and a lonely lion in exile.

Although one of the objectives of the rewriting history project is to end divisions within Rwanda, clearly the myth exemplifies a perspective that favors pre-1959 Tutsi/Hutu identities and social structures. How can a new Rwandan identity be forged if it is conceived through myths that create polarities?

The association AJDS (Association des Jeunes pour la Promotion du Développement et de la Lutte contre la Ségrégation) performs a government-sanctioned history of Rwanda incorporating concepts such as the social mobility between the Hutu and Tutsi and the colonial construction of ethnicity. The theatre group started in November 2004 when a group of secondary students heard radio announcements that genocide ideology was being taught in the schools. They formed an association to combat genocide ideology and to promote development. The group incorporates some of the government-driven concepts of history in their theatre production *Umurage Ukwiye* (The Good Inheritance of Rwanda). The play begins with the headmaster standing in front of the classroom giving a history lesson. He states that the history of Rwanda was written incorrectly by the colonists and asks the students to test their "correct" knowledge of history. He asks, "The European people say that the Tutsi were the only leaders, is this correct or not?" One student stands up and states, "No, that is not correct. There were some Hutu who were Mwamis (kings), like Sehene and Bisangwa." The headmaster continues, "Give me one example to show that the Tutsi, Hutu, and Twa were one." A student states, "If I was a Hutu, I could become a Tutsi. For example, Busyete was a Twa who became a Tutsi. You could be a Hutu today and a Tutsi tomorrow." The headmaster ends the lesson by stating, "The European people lied. They taught the Rwandan people to kill each other. Now you students, you have to explain to others the correct history of Rwanda." The AJDS company utilizes theatre to teach this new curriculum. Although the new national history books have not been released, AJDS states that they receive their historical information from government agencies. The play was performed for over 18 schools in 2005, and has been funded and endorsed by the government.

## Grassroots Theatre and Reconciliation Associations

The legendary theatre and the rewriting history projects raise questions concerning the creation of narratives using what Diana Taylor calls the "repertoire" for embodied performance and the "archive" for more permanent records (2003). While the current government may construct a historical narrative by weaving together tales of a precolonial utopia, grassroots theatre groups use artmaking involving both perpetrators and survivors as a tool of reconciliation. In grassroots theatre, rhetoric is put into practice. At the grassroots/community level, participants face and address the harsh reality that during the genocide neighbors killed their neighbors, husbands killed their wives, and parents killed their own children. With the release, under presidential decrees, of over 20,000 prisoners in 2003 and 35,000 more in 2005, the surviving Rwandan population is being asked to live side by side with the perpetrators of the genocide.

At the beginning of this article, I cite a woman from the grassroots association Umuhanzi w'u Rwanda who creates art with the perpetrator who killed her five children. The survivor and

the perpetrator tell of their loneliness, depression, and isolation prior to joining the cultural association. They were both asked by a community resident to join the troupe. The initiator of the association stated that he saw the mistrust and unease in the community after the release of the prisoners. He wanted to find a way to bring people together, to change the atmosphere of fear. He decided to use theatre, music, and dance to reconcile the community. When asked how art affected her feelings toward the genocide, the survivor stated that it allowed her a kind of personal psychic freedom and the opportunity to participate in nation building:

This art and theatre gave me some kind of happiness. At first I would be discouraged, I would be lonely; as I associate and interact with people I begin feeling all right, I become happy. I can laugh. I can talk to people. I feel liberated. When you are with others singing, acting, performing...the kind of ideas and fears that have been harbored in your heart will subside. I feel relaxed and I don't take time to think about them because much of my time is to interact and to laugh and to talk and to be happy with others. Another thing is when you are in this mission, it leads others to understand things which they didn't understand before. It makes you interact with a person you used to fear. Another thing is that there are things that were hidden from you which you get to know. The good news is that when we are invited to say something or perform somewhere, you find yourself participating in nation building. This leads to the success of unity and reconciliation as well as gacaca courts. It shows the people who have been antagonists, who have not been staying together well, and we go as this group to give them an example of how people will live together. (Umuhanzi w'u Rwanda 2005)

Grassroots theatre is a tool for constructing new relationships and community dynamics. The above quote from a member of the Umuhanzi w'u Rwanda association presents several examples of how the survivor changed her relationship with the perpetrator through theatre. She suggests that theatre made her forget; she temporarily became so involved in the artmaking that she related in a new way with the perpetrator. During several observations of the association, I witnessed the survivor holding her baby and laughing as she and the perpetrator conversed. In interviews with the perpetrator, likewise, he spoke to how artmaking helped his nightmares subside and gave him an opportunity to reconcile.

Another association, Abiyunze (United), was created by a perpetrator and stands as an example of a group dedicated to confession and forgiveness. The group consists of 30 perpetrators, 40 survivors, and 60 others who have family in prison. The rest of the association of over 130 members consists of returned refugees and general community members. A perpetrator and one of the original founders of the association, Donat,<sup>5</sup> recounted that following the presidential decree of 2003 he was released from prison. Seeking forgiveness for his crimes, he approached over 60 families. Donat felt that there was a need for people to interact, which led to the formation of the association. Some of the practices of the association are beekeeping, building houses for both the survivors and the families of the perpetrators, craft making, and cultural performances that include dance, music, and theatre.

Seraphine, a survivor who helped to develop the association, was a genocide survivor whose husband had been killed. Donat approached her house over 10 times before he was granted forgiveness. She stated that she joined the association "for unity and reconciliation," and because there was equal representation in the group of those victimized, those who killed, and those whose families had relatives in prison. "We dance together, we sing, we make handicrafts, build houses. When they confess, it gives morality." When I asked her how art changed her feelings after losing her husband, she said, "When we sing and dance, we feel happy and excited. I no longer see them as enemies, but those who share the problems of the survivor" (Abiyunze 2005).

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5. The names Donat and Seraphine are fictional names that represent the perpetrator and survivor and are used for their privacy and protection.



*Figure 4. The association members of Abiyunze step forward to dance. Perpetrators and survivors perform their reconciliation. A member carries the sign “Ishyirahamwe Abiyunze Ry Igahini Dushyigikye Ubumwe N’Ubwiyunge” (the Association of Those Who Are United). (Photo by Ananda Breed)*

The examples of Abiyunze and Umuhanzi w’u Rwanda pivot between illustrating political reconciliation campaigns and presenting intimate acts of confession and forgiveness. At the end of her interview with the survivor in Umuhanzi w’u Rwanda, the interviewee switches from her personal experiences of art as transformative to government rhetoric of nation building stating, “The good news is that when we are invited to say something or perform somewhere, you find yourself participating in nation building. This leads to the success of unity and reconciliation as well as gacaca courts” (Umuhanzi w’u Rwanda 2005). The perpetrator and survivor from Umuhanzi w’u Rwanda stood next to one another as they sang the song “Ukuri na Gacaca Bizafasha ubumwe n’ubwiyunrige” (Truth and Gacaca Will Help Unity and Reconciliation), at times holding hands, swinging their arms up and down—perpetrator and survivor performing reconciliation.

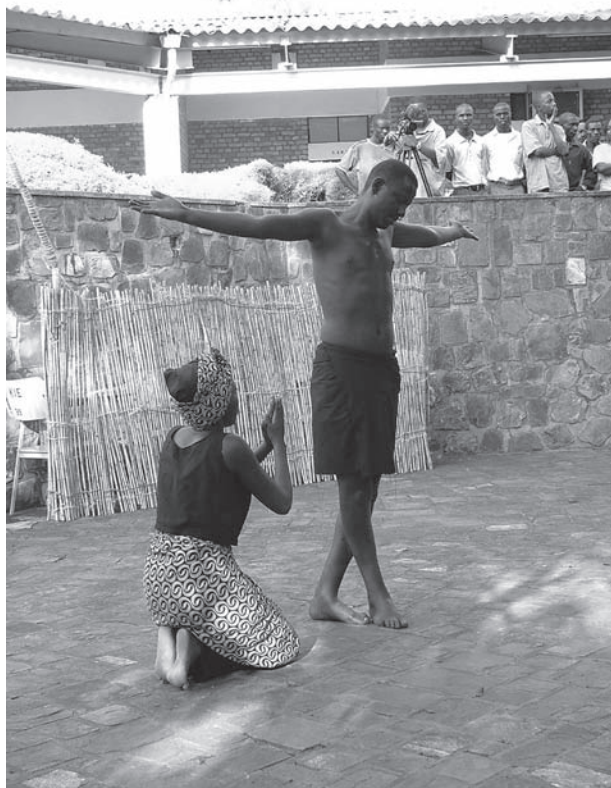
However, there is a danger that repeating slogans and the government rhetoric of reconciliation will not develop truthful and analytical ways to address the problems facing post-genocide Rwanda. This was brought home to me by what Oswald Rutimburana, the Project Coordinator for NURC, stated while we were driving to a grassroots theatre presentation:

Drama should approach reconciliation with full confidence in understanding the causes of the real problems affecting a group of people and expressing those problems in a general manner. There are elements to reconciliation that people are not addressing due to fear—

as an example, using the terms Hutu, Tutsi, and Twa. People should have no fear of saying these terms, but they are useless labels for us to use in Rwanda. We need to find the causes to bad human nature, coming from one's own environment. (2005)

Indeed, the current portrayal of “unity” and “reconciliation” needs to be deconstructed. Associations including AJDS speak of a unified Rwanda, in which there are no differences. “We are one, with one language, and one culture,” stated Fred Kabanda, President of AJDS (2005). The associations stage a present and future Rwanda that is as mythically utopian as the precolonial utopia. Very little is being done to address the contradictions in the statements of Rutiburana and Kabanda. Rutiburana wants remembering and critical analysis; Kabanda wants to build a new Rwanda through the vision and enactment of a unified, reconciled Rwanda. One looks to the past, the other towards the future.

There are over 300 associations throughout the country that have emerged post-genocide to construct new communities through incentives such as beekeeping, building houses, forming cultural troupes, or assembling debate groups. Of these associations, 60 have been tracked through the NURC, and are offered occasional training sessions or light monetary support through small donations of livestock or equipment. Shamsi Kazimbaya, the Director of Planning and Program Management at NURC, stated in 2005 that a goal for future projects would be to increase the number of associations.



*Figure 5. The Christ figure stands center stage as a woman begs for protection in Iryo Nabonye (What I Saw) at the Kigali Institute for Education in Kigali, Rwanda on 16 January 2005. Eventually, the Christ figure walks off the stage, symbolizing the ultimate abandonment of God during the genocide. (Photo by Kevin Green)*

According to members of NURC, grassroots associations have been the most successful tools in fostering reconciliation. While until now the associations have developed organically on a local level, NURC plans to play an active role in developing associations in areas where reconciliation has been problematic. In this way, organic grassroots initiatives are adopted by the government to promote reconciliation on a national level. The new NURC-initiated associations target the region of the North, in which impediments to reconciliation include the concept of a “double genocide” because even as the RPF stopped the genocide, they committed their own war crimes in 1994. The associations were formed in Gitarama, Mutarama, and Kibungo. According to Kazimbaya, the new NURC associations will be formed by first training and sensitizing the community to the concept of reconciliation, after which there is the hope that the associations will form by themselves.

The reconciliation associations integrate other objectives, such as community building through theatre. The objectives of many reconciliation associations go beyond healing the rupture of communities due to the genocide by integrating poverty reduction strategies. The associations feel that for reconciliation to be possible, there must be community support for livelihood. An example is the association AJDS. While several of their plays promote unity and reconciliation, they are also very active in community building and development, setting up departments that speak to unemployment, HIV/AIDS, human rights, and gender issues.

Although the above examples illustrate associations that address nation building as a post-conflict scenario and move towards reconciliation, this next example presents the potential for theatre to incriminate. Several young people created the association JACOC (Les Jeunes Accolies contre les Impacts du Chômage) after graduating from secondary school. They have used theatre for education and health campaigns, but recently they have been mobilizers for the gacaca. According to the gacaca district coordinator, the rate of those accused in the gacaca courts who confess is 75 percent, compared to the national average of 35 percent. When asked to explain the difference, he stated “theatre.” The young people of JACOC are from mixed families of both the accused and survivors. They decided to use theatre as a tool to help communities “speak the truth.”

Theatre is being used to elicit memories of the genocide to aid in the testimonials and confessions for the gacaca proceedings. Killings started in 1990 due to the enforcement of the French military through Operation Turquoise and continued until the end of the genocide.<sup>6</sup> The gacaca coordinator showed me a chart with statistics: 284 *Inyangamugayo* (Persons of Integrity, used as judges in gacaca) were charged with genocide, 635 local leaders participated in genocide, and 2,732 members of the community confessed to participating in the genocide. In that sector alone, over 45,000 were massacred.

In an interview with a perpetrator of the genocide, the interviewee related that while watching a theatre production about the genocide called *Indangamirwa* (Attraction), he had a flashback to the events of the genocide. The story came out like a book, unfolding events and



Figure 6. In *Iryo Nabonye (What I Saw)* the militia hunt for Tutsis. The Kigali Institute for Education in Kigali, Rwanda, 16 January 2005. (Photo by Kevin Green)

6. Operation Turquoise, which was sponsored by the French government, at first posed as a peacekeeping mission; it was later revealed that the French troops were supporting and contributed to the genocide.

characters previously forgotten and/or erased from memory. Following the performance, he testified in the gacaca and revealed the names of perpetrators that he remembered having committed atrocities. In an interview with another perpetrator, he conveyed that the play evoked in him the memory of several additional killings towards which he had contributed. He confessed to the crimes at the gacaca. A different perpetrator was asked to explain how the genocide was carried out in the region. He replied that it was carried out en masse: “If you did not kill, you would be killed.” In this community, massacres were often orchestrated by organizing the local community to kill in a distant region where they did not know the inhabitants. In turn, the mobs in those communities would kill the Tutsi locally. Thus neighbors did not kill neighbors, which was a common occurrence during the genocide.

Although the play prompted accusations and confessions, it also aided reconciliation. One perpetrator who confessed to killing 11 individuals stated that when he witnessed the genocide play, he was inspired to seek forgiveness. Until then, he had feared approaching the families. After watching the play, he sought forgiveness and told them where the bodies were buried. He stated, “The family was happy because they were able to find out where the bodies were buried and I helped them dig up the bodies. I had thought about confessing before, because I’m a Christian, but when I saw that nothing bad happened to the person in the drama, I felt it would be safe to confess without anything bad happening to me.” (2005)

The play by JACOC, *Dubaranire Kunga Izatanye* (Let’s Try Our Best to Unite Those Who Are Divided), depicts an ill-fated relationship between a young boy and girl; the boy belongs to a Hutu family that participated in the genocide and the girl belongs to a Tutsi family, a number of whose members were killed. The structure and content of the play is similar to Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*. The play’s plot includes a testimony from the Hutu father in prison, urban myths about the potential double genocide that Tutsis are planning for the Hutu, and a staging of gacaca. The young boy and girl are instrumental to the eventual reconciliation between the two families. When asked why they created *Dubaranire Kunga Izatanye*, several young people stated that it mirrored their own lives. According to the actors, another reason for the high confession rate in that area is because the young people have mobilized their relatives to confess in the gacaca. A young man stated that most of them were around 11 or 12 during the time of the genocide. They know who participated. One young person approached his father about confessing his part in the genocide, which eventually did happen. In this way, theatre mirrors the stories of actual lives.

Theatre has been utilized to activate memories of the conflict and to promote confessions in support of the gacaca hearings. In this example, theatre for reconciliation is likewise used for incrimination. The gacaca coordinator and several Inyangamagayo from the area claimed theatre had been used to enlist confessions. They told me that at several performances, judges would plant themselves strategically in the audience. During and following the performances, there were several confessions triggered by the dramas.

Audience responses to the grassroots and legendary theatre productions vary according to location, population, and theatre content. I have witnessed several “genocide plays” in which members of the audience were traumatized. During the 12th commemoration of the genocide, *Rwanda My Hope* was performed at the Gisozi Genocide Memorial in Kigali, Rwanda. During one scene in which bodies are carried above the shoulders, a woman started to approach the stage asking, “Where are you taking them, down the Nyabarongo river?” A child started screaming and was carried away by first aid workers. There also have been several productions in which the audience laughed during scenes of the genocide. During a production of a genocide play at Sovu Memorial, AJDS depicted the roles young people played during the genocide, as RPF soldiers and Interahamwe. The audience consisted of hundreds of survivors. I watched reactions, and several women turned away from the production, covering their heads or eyes. Yet, when the actors offered a somewhat more comic portrayal of the Interahamwe, the women began to engage with the drama, somehow no longer frightened. Other productions include the



Figure 7. A young boy turns to the audience to say, “I forgive, you forgive, YOU should tell the truth.” *Iryo Nabonye (What I Saw)*, the Kigali Institute for Education in Kigali, Rwanda, 16 January 2005. (Photo by Kevin Green)

reconciliation play *Iryo Nabonye* (What I Saw), which generated audience responses regarding identity and the current challenges of being a Rwandan, of coming from a tainted past and moving towards a united future. The audience often responded to the questions posed by the actors, engaging with the drama through dialogue.

A common trope of reconciliation plays is the marriage between a Hutu and a Tutsi, as in the production of *Dubaranire Kunga Izatanye*. During the reconciliation scenes between opposing families, there are often cheers and shouts of approval, and even the use of comedy. I watched one production in which a main character, a Hutu perpetrator, served as comic relief in the play. He continuously tried to kill people, but he could not aim his bow and arrow in the right direction. His actions often set off huge bouts of laughter from the crowd. In speaking to a member of the association, I learned that the community and cast of the grassroots association is largely Hutu, with one survivor standing as

head of the company. The use of comedy allows the community to witness and to respond to information that they may otherwise avoid. Following the scene portraying genocide, the “comic relief” character is requested by his daughter to confess. He eventually provides testimony at the gacaca. Perhaps by “humanizing” the perpetrator, the audience may be able to identify with the situation and thus react positively to some of the suggested messages of unity, reconciliation, and justice. Achille Mbembe and Janet Roitman note the use of laughter in times of crisis:

As rites of expiation, laughter and derision give way to an imaginary well-being; they allow for distance between the subject who laughs and the object of mockery. The division thus realized is precisely what permits the laughing subject to regain possession of self and to wear the mask, that is, to become a stranger to this “thing” (*la chose*) that exercises domination—and then to deride torture, murder, and all other forms of wretchedness. (Mbembe 1996:186)



Associations, artists, and audiences respond differently to the representation of genocide and reconciliation. While some may feel that genocide must be engaged with in a realistic and respectful manner, others have used comedy to pass messages to the intended audience of perpetrators and to relieve the trauma of survivors. Ethically, there is a range of contestable approaches to both representation and reception, more than I have addressed in this article.

## Conclusion

The present national government of Rwanda claims that prior to colonization, there was no ethnic divide, that the Hutu, Tutsi, and Twa lived together peacefully. Several theatre productions including Mashirika's *Rwanda My Home* and Mutabaruka's *Umukino w'Umuganura* portray this stance. This kind of theatre reflects government-driven information campaigns based on a carefully scripted history. It does not pursue questions concerning multiple narratives, but rather enacts a singular state-driven narrative. Grassroots theatre illustrates the potential of theatre for reconciliation. Survivors and perpetrators use theatre to unite their community; dancing, singing, and acting together have enabled them to forge new relationships, and to reconcile and heal themselves. Adorno inquired, "What role do artists have, when genocide is part of our cultural heritage?" (1977:189). Taylor comments on the necessity of theatre to embody the archive of history in relation to the play *Contraevento* by Yuyachkani: "Through performance—the music, masked dances, and ritual incantations—the play suggests, atrocity will be remembered and thought even when



Figure 8. A genocidaire takes a cigarette break while sitting on the macheted bodies in *Iryo Nabonye (What I Saw)* at the Kigali Institute for Education in Kigali, Rwanda on 16 January 2005. (Photo by Kevin Green)

there are no external witnesses and no recourse to the archive. Yet these memories disappear when scholars and activists fail to recognize the traces left by embodied knowledge" (2003:204). In Rwanda, the repertoire and the archive are working simultaneously, using theatre to "never forget" and enlisting international scholars to archive the genocide by serving as secondary witnesses to a genocide they at first ignored.

But the enactments are incomplete. For theatre to be reconciliatory, it must be participatory, not merely the recitation of government propaganda. Theatre must engage the population in critical discussions of the complexities of the Rwandan crisis for any lasting peace to be possible. Yet, what right does any Western theatre practitioner have to engage Rwandans in a discourse about human rights? In a country that has been destabilized, and that could erupt in violence again, is it a mistake to

empower people to question the government's campaign to rewrite history? Could one possibly incite conflict by encouraging multiple narratives that challenge the government's simplistic version of the utopian precolonial past and a peaceful present and future? What is possible? The genocide was carried out with mass participation in the government's agenda: the participation of the entire population in the state-driven campaign towards reconciliation is another example of following the government's agenda.

In rewriting Rwandan history, it is important to note what is being forgotten or remembered through cultural performances and grassroots theatre. Richard Schechner asserts that both remembering and forgetting are necessary for theatre in a time/place of war: "If remembering is crucial to testimony, accusation, and certain phases of healing, forgetting is necessary for the resumption of everyday life and

for long-term healing" (2002:169). My concern is that when a history or narrative is erased or forgotten, does the forgetting inflict violence through the erasure? Who does it heal or inflict harm upon? Does promoting a unified Rwanda actually erase elements of cultural traditions that provide opposing viewpoints? What parts of Rwandan culture are being glorified, and does this automatically politicize cultural forms, such as dance, that may represent a specific group such as the Tutsi, Hutu, or Twa, while on the surface denouncing such differences? Through legendary theatre, the international community is included both as a character in the story and as an intended audience. In some cases, the performances interrogate the role of the international community in the genocide. In others, the performances promote the image of a unified Rwanda for the audience. Theatre, in this case, becomes government propaganda. Yet, it is through the imagination that a different vision for the future can be created. While the genocide was imagined and then enacted through the myth of long-tailed Tutsi cockroaches that were going to invade Rwanda to kill the Hutu, reconciliation may be imagined and enacted through the myth of a unified Land of a Thousand Hills where Rwandans live side by side in unity with one language and one culture.

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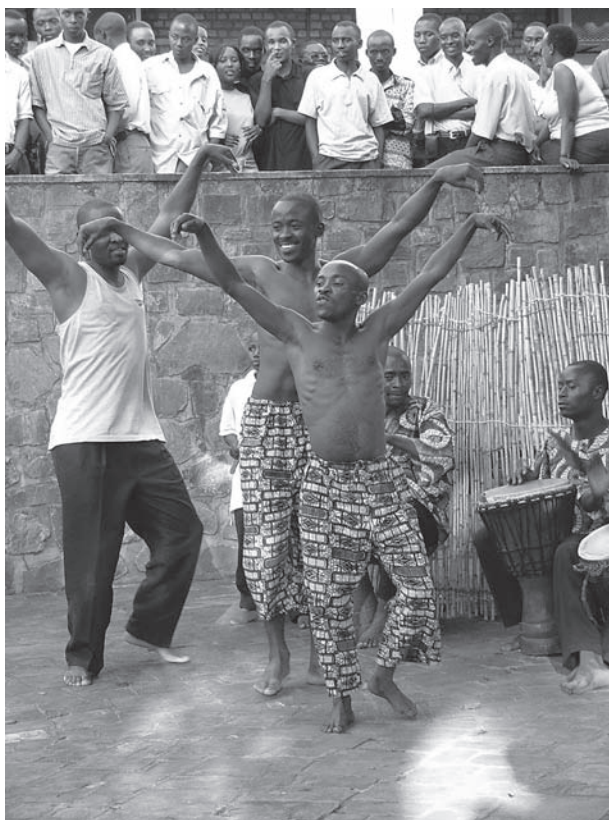


Figure 9. Iryo Nabonye ends with a message of hope. The Kigali Institute for Education in Kigali, Rwanda, 16 January 2005. (Photo by Kevin Green)

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