

IDEOLOGY AND INTERESTS IN THE RWANDAN PATRIOTIC FRONT: SINGING THE STRUGGLE IN PRE-GENOCIDE RWANDA

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ABSTRACT

In the study of African Politics, the analysis of political ideologies as a normative engine of political action seems to have receded in favour of a treatment of ideology as the support of actors in their pursuit of material interests. Rwanda is not an exception. The ideology of the ruling Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) has been predominantly analysed as a self-serving strategy geared towards the reinforcement of the party's power. Such treatment of ideology prevents a full understanding of the RPF. This article argues that ideology should also be conceptualized as a matrix that can reshape material incentives and through which the RPF's interests have emerged. To do so, the article analyses new sources of material, the songs of mobilization from RPF members and supporters composed before the Front took power during the genocide, to systematically delineate the RPF's early ideology. The analysis centres on four main themes – Rwandan national unity, the RPF's depiction of itself, its depiction of its enemy, and its relationship with the international community – and traces their influence on RPF interests in the post-genocide era. It reveals the surprisingly long-lasting power of ideas despite fast-changing material circumstances.

THE STUDY OF AFRICAN POLITICS HAS LONG focussed on the material. This trend can be traced to the double influence since the late 1970s of the rational choice paradigm and of the neopatrimonialism school in African political analysis.¹ The former considers politics as the product of self-interested, rational individuals. The latter explains politics mainly by the tendency of politicians to blur the public/private dichotomy in order to better serve their

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¹ One of the earliest examples of the rational choice paradigm is the work of Robert Bates, *Rural responses to industrialization* (Yale University Press, New Haven, 1976). For a critical review of neopatrimonialism, see Thandika Mkandawire 'Neopatrimonialism and the political economy of economic performance in Africa: Critical reflections', *World Politics* 67, 3 (2015), pp. 563-612.

interests and the ones of their family, ethnic group, or clients. Although a literature, often from anthropology, highlights the role of ideas, especially neoliberal ones, in influencing politics and institutions, structural explanations appear prevalent in the study of African political behaviours. Unlike during the two decades after decolonization,² the analysis of political ideologies as a normative engine of political action seems to have receded in favour of a treatment of ideology as the support of actors in their pursuit of material interests.³

Post-genocide Rwanda is not an exception. It is widely recognized that the ideology of the ruling Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) has played a significant role in shaping Rwanda's trajectory since 1994.⁴ Yet, the RPF ideological stance has predominantly been analysed as self-serving and geared towards the reinforcement of the ruling party's power. The literature does not ignore the potency of ideas within the RPF or their unintended consequences in post-genocide Rwanda, but it typically explores ideas as a result of interests: the instrument to manufacture consent and manipulate external audiences, whether domestic or international. Andrea Purdeková for example considers that the RPF ideological discourse on unity serves as 'a powerful legitimization of rule' and 'a chip to gain foreign support',⁵ while Filip Reyntjens argues that it 'served above all to hide ethnocracy'.⁶ Susan Thomson analyses the RPF ideological discourse on history as 'strategically revisionist', 'a product of the RPF elite designed to safeguard their own positions of power', and used 'to maintain

² Yves Bénot, *Idéologies des indépendances Africaines* (François Maspéro, Paris, 1969).

³ For a similar analysis in the social sciences, see Daniel Béland and Robert Cox, 'Introduction' in Daniel Béland and Robert Cox (eds), *Ideas and politics in social science research* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2011). On policy in Africa specifically, Béland and Ridde note that 'the role of ideas in implementation is seldom explored in a detailed and systematic way.' Daniel Béland and Valéry Ridde, 'Ideas and policy implementation: Understanding the resistance against free health care in Africa', *Global Health Governance* 10, 3 (2016), pp. 9-23, p. 9.

⁴ e.g. Prithvi Behuria, 'Countering threats, stabilising politics and selling hope: Examining the Agaciro concept as a response to a critical juncture in Rwanda', *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 10, 3 (2016), pp. 434-451; Benjamin Chemouni, 'The political path to universal health coverage: Power, ideas and community-based health insurance in Rwanda', *World Development* 106 (2018), pp. 87-98.

⁵ Andrea Purdeková, *Making ubumwe: Power, state and camps in Rwanda's unity-building project* (Berghahn Books, Oxford, 2015), p. 78.

⁶ Filip Reyntjens, '(Re)-imagining a reluctant post-genocide society: The Rwandan Patriotic Front's ideology and practice', *Journal of Genocide Research* 18, 1 (2016), pp. 61-81, p. 75.

control of Rwanda's political and social landscape.'⁷ Overall, there is a consensus that 'the regime has used ideology as a tool to deflect domestic and international criticism and control the population, in other words, as a means to maintain power.'⁸

The aim of this article is twofold. First, the article demonstrates that such treatment of ideology prevents a full understanding of the RPF's behaviour. Rather than only considering ideology as the instrument to advance the RPF's interests, the article argues that ideology should also be conceptualized as a matrix that can reshape material incentives and through which the RPF's interests have emerged. To this end, the second contribution of the article is to provide an analysis of RPF ideology based on new sources. Despite the importance of ideology in post-genocide politics, systematic analyses of the RPF's ideology remain scarce. The works directly concerned with the RPF's ideology have analysed it from a particular angle. Philip Roessler and Harry Verhoeven have addressed pan-Africanist and anti-neo colonial aspects of the RPF through their wider analysis of the ideology of liberation politics in Africa.⁹ Purdeková has focussed on the idea of unity in post-genocide Rwanda.¹⁰ Other works have reflected about the influence of the RPF "high-modernist" ideas in the post-1994 development policies.¹¹ Overall, with the exception of an article by Reyntjens, 'specific themes have been addressed, often implicitly but not in an overall fashion.'¹² In addition, these analyses, including Reyntjens', are based on post-1994 interviews, declarations and documents, when the RPF was already a successful rebellion-turned-ruling party that could potentially alter its original ideological stance to serve the new imperatives of power. This is unsurprising as RPF's early ideological statements are extremely rare, probably due to the

⁷ Susan Thomson, *Whispering truth to power: Everyday resistance to reconciliation in postgenocide Rwanda* (University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, 2013), pp. 52 & 53.

⁸ Reyntjens, '(Re-)imagining', p. 61.

⁹ Philip Roessler and Harry Verhoeven, *Why comrades go to war: liberation politics and the outbreak of Africa's deadliest conflict* (Hurst & Co, London, 2006), pp. 29-39; 109-110.

¹⁰ Purdeková, *Making ubumwe*.

¹¹ Malin Hasselskog, 'Rwandan developmental "social engineering": What does it imply and how is it displayed?' *Progress in Development Studies*, 15, 2 (2015), pp. 154-169

¹² Reyntjens, '(Re-)imagining', p. 61.

clandestine nature of the RPF, its sociological composition of young, and not always educated, soldiers, and the general preference in Rwandan culture for orality. Reyntjens thus notes that, among all the pre-genocide RPF statements and radio broadcasts he reviewed, none contain significant ideological substance.¹³ Only the RPF's minimalist eight points political programme circulated in 1990 included some broad ideological references to national unity, democracy and a self-reliant nation.¹⁴ Consequently, missing from the analysis is a systematic empirical study of the original RPF ideological discourse. This article fills this gap by analysing songs of RPF members and supporters that were composed before or around the RPF victory (1988-1995). This ensures that the ideology identified is genuinely reflective of ideological thinking at the time and not reconstructed *ex-post*. The songs' primary audience were not foreigners, donors, NGOs or the Rwandan population. Rather, they had a function of diffusing an ideology within the movement itself for mobilization and education, and can, as a result, hardly be considered as a manipulative tool for an external audience. Through analysis of pre-genocide songs, the article reveals the surprisingly long-lasting power of ideas despite changing material circumstances.

The article is organized in three sections. The first discusses the concepts of ideology and interests. It then presents the research methodology. The second section contains an analysis of different ideological themes in songs and their implications for post-genocide governance. The last section reflects on the contribution of the article to the understanding of Rwandan and African politics in general. It demonstrates the value of adopting a constructivist perspective in interpreting the RPF's interests after 1994 and reasserts the importance of ideology as a key driver of political behaviour in Africa.

Ideas, interests, and songs

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

Ideology can be understood as ideas constituting ‘the shared framework of mental models that groups of individuals possess that provide both an interpretation of the environment and a prescription as to how that environment should be structured.’¹⁵ Based on this definition, this article explores ideology by focusing on three aspects: a cognitive dimension, about how the world is interpreted; a normative dimension, specifying how the world should be; and an instrumental one, specifying the means to attain such an ideal.

The importance of ideas, and notably ideology,¹⁶ in explaining human behaviours has been increasingly recognized over the last twenty years in social science and has rekindled the debate about whether “interests” or “ideas” drive human agency.¹⁷ This ‘ideational turn’¹⁸ has been a reaction to rational-choice approaches that have considered ideas as the mere reflection of underlying, objective, material interests (money, power, utility) that exist independently from actors’ beliefs.¹⁹ Ideas in this perspective are either the medium through which actors discover their “true” interests or weapons in the pursuit of such interests. In contrast, the ideational approach to politics emphasizes that interests do not emerge in a direct manner from the material world. They are subjective and constructed through ideas. Ideas matter in determining political behaviour because they are the lens through which the world is interpreted, preferences constructed and, eventually, guides to action. There are no objectively self-interested actors, but only actors with sets of subjective ideas about what their interests are.²⁰

¹⁵ Arthur T. Denzau and Douglass C. North, ‘Shared mental models: ideologies and institutions’, *Kyklos* 47, 1 (1994), pp. 3-31, p. 4.

¹⁶ Kathleen Knight, ‘Transformations of the concept of ideology in the twentieth century’, *American Political Science Review* 100, 4 (2006), pp. 619-626.

¹⁷ Mark Blyth, ‘Structures do not come with an instruction sheet: interests, ideas, and progress in political science’, *Perspectives on Politics* 1, 4 (2003), pp. 695–706; Béland and Cox, ‘Introduction’.

¹⁸ Mark Blyth, ‘Any more bright ideas? The ideational turn of comparative political economy’, *Comparative Politics* 29, 1, 1997, pp. 229-250.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.* Béland and Cox, ‘Introduction’; Colin Hay ‘Ideas and the construction of interests’, in Béland and Cox (eds.) *Ideas and politics*, pp. 65-82.

From this perspective, ideas and interests are not rival concepts. Following Mark Blyth, the relationship between the two can be better understood by considering interests as ‘a cluster concept’ that encompasses ideas and will.²¹ This avoids conceptualising interests tautologically, as an ex-post observation (they do it because it is in their interest to do it). Then, ‘specifying interests becomes less about structural determination and more about the construction of “wants” as mediated by beliefs and desires – that is, ideas.’²² Based on this conceptualization of ideas, this article aims to offer a better understanding of the RPF ideology, which is predominantly treated in the literature as the tool to advance, and the reflection of, interests. Instead, the article shows how and why the RPF came to conceive some of its interests the way it did.

Because ideologies are not straightforward reflections of material conditions, they cannot be observed directly. In the striking absence of RPF ideological statements before 1994, songs written by the RPF and its supporters provide a precious window on their ideology. Songs have regularly been used to shed light on the ideas, aspirations, and demands of liberation movements across Africa, for instance in Uganda, South Africa, or Zimbabwe.²³ This is unsurprising as songs play an important role in liberation movements. Like the songs of social movements, they help to educate members, sympathizers and the wider population to the movement’s cause.²⁴ They lift spirits of members and facilitate their mobilization. Songs also help to recruit sympathizers by appealing to, or by providing a compelling validation to emerging political identities.²⁵ They are consequently a prime site to observe

²¹ Mark Blyth, ‘Structures do not come’.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 29.

²³ Musambayi Katumanga, ‘Folk poetry as a weapon of struggle: an analysis of the Chaka Mchaka resistance songs of the national resistance movement/army Uganda’, in Kimani Njogu and Hervé Moupeu (eds), *Songs and politics in eastern Africa* (Mkukina Nyota Publishers, Dar es Salam, 2007), pp.129-157; Andra le Roux-Kemp, ‘Struggle music: South African politics in song’ *Law and Humanities* 8, 2 (2014), pp. 247-268; Charles Pfukwa ‘Black September et al: Chimurenga songs as historical narratives in the Zimbabwean liberation war’, *Muziki*, 5, 1 (2008), pp. 30-61.

²⁴ Rob Rosenthal, ‘Serving the movement: The role(s) of music’, *Popular Music & Society* 25, 3-4, (2001), pp.11-24.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

ideology since their functions of education, mobilization, and recruitment require them to offer a coherent interpretation of the world, an ideal to fight for, and the means to reach it.

Songs were an especially powerful vehicle to propagate ideas in the RPF for two main reasons. First, they occupied a central place in the strong apparatus of political education. They were essential to the *ikitamaduni*, an evening gathering of singing and dancing organized by political commissars. In the bush, around the fire, soldiers could spontaneously break into a song whether to promise an exemplary punishment to President Juvénal Habyarimana, recount the feats of recent battles, or celebrate the return to the motherland. But the importance of songs in circulating ideas went beyond the RPF itself. Even before the attack of the RPF on 1 October 1990, songs were the means of identity expression and collective memory among its supporters in Rwanda and abroad. Audio tapes circulated covertly between families and were smuggled in and out of the country to foster nostalgia for the past and hope of return for those who had fled Rwanda since the 1950s following the anti-Tutsi pogroms. Second, songs are traditionally a crucial form of artistic expression in Rwanda. The Rwandan culture is a culture of words. In the virtual absence of visual arts,²⁶ aesthetics has been expressed through extremely rich verbal and musical arts throughout Rwandan society, in every milieu from the court to the poorest family.²⁷

The twenty songs selected for this article include songs of the RPF itself, used by its cultural troupe and/or sung by soldiers, and songs of the struggle in a more general sense, sung by RPF sympathizers (Table 1). Although not from the RPF directly, they are a testimony of the worldview that RPF supporters were harbouring. All songs are in Kinyarwanda, except the song *Hatuwezi Kurudi Nyuma* (Song O), which is a kind of “kinyarwandized” Swahili. It reflects how Swahili has been used at times as a *lingua franca* in

²⁶ Pierre Smith, ‘Aspects de l'esthétique au Rwanda,’ *L'Homme* 25, 96 (1985), pp. 7-22.

²⁷ Jos Gansemans, *Les instruments de musique du Rwanda: étude ethnomusicologique* (Leuven University Press, Leuven, 1988), pp. 26-27.

the RPF, especially for young people who had lost the Kinyarwanda of their parents while in exile.

Many RPF songs of the liberation struggle exist. Not all are recorded, and some are probably already lost. Identifying, recording, transcribing, and translating them is consequently a continuous process, and the list presented here is far from exhaustive. The article focusses on songs of the pre-genocide period or around the genocide. After a cursory examination of about 40 pre-genocide songs known to the authors, 20 were selected because they were identified as particularly revealing in terms of ideological content or especially renowned. Whole songs, or excerpts from them, have been quoted in the text when particularly illustrative. Songs were composed in a decentralized manner, by RPF members, soldiers or members of the diaspora. They were often only circulated orally, which means that they were prone to change. As a consequence, it was sometimes difficult to make definitive attribution to a particular composer. The analysis relies on the earliest known version of the song. It concentrates on the lyrics but does not engage with the context or the performance. While both can be sources of political messages, such analysis is beyond the scope of this article.

Table 1: songs used for the article

	Title of the song in Kinyarwanda	Title translated	Composer	Date of composition
Song A	<i>Icyicaró</i>	Our seat	Indahemuka troupe ²⁸	Just before the Arusha accord

²⁸ The RPF cultural troupe.

				(1992-93).
Song B	<i>Inkotanyi duhuje amarembo</i>	Inkontanyi let's agree to take the same path of entry	Indahemuka troupe	1991-92
Song C	<i>Twiririm bire demokarasi</i>	Let's celebrate democracy	Indahemuka troupe	1993
Song D	<i>Girubuntu</i>	Express your humanity through a flow of generosity	Women's group from the diaspora	1990-91
Song E	<i>Turaje</i>	We are on our way to you	Women's group from the diaspora	1990-92
Song F	<i>Iya Mbere Ukwakira</i>	October 1 st	RPF fighters	1990-92
Song G	<i>Mbabwire inzozi narose</i>	The dream I had	RPF fighters and Mariya Yohanna	1990-91
Song H	<i>Ndate Ubutwari Bw'inkotanyi</i>	Let me celebrate the heroism of Inkotanyi	Indahemuka troupe or RPF fighters	1991-93
Song I	<i>Iribori ry'u Rwanda</i>	The intrinsic beauty of Rwanda ²⁹	Imaculée Mukandoli	1995

²⁹ Literally, *Iribori* are the stretch marks on the skin, traditionally a sign of beauty of the well-fed women. It serves as a metaphor for the intrinsic beauty of Rwanda: a beauty that originates from inside one's body before covering it.

Song J	<i>Ngizo zaje Izamarere</i>	Here come the brave fighters	Fanny Gatera and Muyango	1994
Song K	<i>Afrika warakubititse</i>	Africa you suffered	RPF fighters	1990-91
Song L	<i>RPF Turatashye</i>	RPF we are coming back home	RPF fighters	1990-91
Song M	<i>Intsinzi</i>	Victory	Maria Yohana Mukankuranga and Angelic Garuka	1992
Song N	<i>Intare</i>	The Lion	Annonciata Kamaliza	1992-93
Song O	<i>Hatuwezi kurudi nyuma</i> [Swahili]	We can never retreat	RPF fighters	1991
Song P	<i>Mbega Urugendo</i> <i>Rurerure</i>	What a long journey	RPF fighters	1990-91
Song Q	<i>Turatashye Inkotanyi</i> <i>z'Amarere</i>	We are coming home, intrepid Inkotanyi	Indahemuka	1990-91
Song R	<i>Inganzo y'umunezero</i>	The inspiration of Happiness	Cécile Kayirebwa	1988
Song S	<i>Inganji Iganje</i>	The undeniable supremacy	Immaculée Mukandoli ("Inshongore")	1994
Song T	<i>Gisa Shingiro ry'intwari</i>	[Fred] [Rwigema], the pillar	Gisa Jean-Marie Muyango and	1994

precolonial Rwanda. Gasabo is the region from which the embryonic kingdom expanded around the 15th century.³¹ The idea of the eternal unified Rwanda is also promoted by linking unity with the spiritual world of the Rwandan God, *Imana*. No reference to Christianity is made in the songs; rather, spirituality is presented as exclusively pagan and pre-colonial. The harmonious Rwanda of *Imana* is implicitly presented as tainted by Habyarimana. Song P for example portrays the eternal magnificent Rwanda as tarnished, to the point that ‘other countries mock her’. Erasing the stain of disunity then becomes a divine mission for the RPF. Only when Rwanda is restored as united can she regain her sacred status that she should not have lost in the first place, as explained in Song B:

Our only goal is unity, which will end injustice
We bring back the true love that leaves no room for malignancy
We are rallying around the God of Rwanda
It is He that gave us the mission to never let the country disappear
He gave the youth the mission to fight for her

Our only declared objective is to give her back her title of Rwanda
A Rwanda full of serenity and fulsome, lasting peace
Let’s make her a marvel that raises Rwandans with care
[...]

Victory of arms that marks the final end of all conflicts
Fighters without fear lifted her [Rwanda] up from her dizzying fall
Oh Comforter that has made us inseparable
To constitute our country for eternity

³¹ Jan Vansina, *Antecedents to modern Rwanda: The Nyiginya Kingdom* (James Currey, Oxford, 2004), pp. 11 & 17.

So that we can celebrate our Creator!

In addition to the exalted nation, the idea of unity also manifests itself through the celebration of the indivisible character of its people. This is the direct rejection of the ideology of Hutu Power that portrayed the Tutsi as a foreign minority within a Hutu nation and the RPF as an invading force aiming to exploit the Hutu.³² In contrast, the songs of the liberation systematically emphasize the belonging of refugees to the national community. Songs present them as the children of the same land, and of the same father, the Rwandan God *Imana*, the ‘Comforter that made [Rwandans] inseparable’ (Song B). Unity is also celebrated through the political events of the time such as the 1993 Arusha accords in Song A:

Our seat [at the negotiating table] has brought victory

We reconcile the Rwanda of inside and outside

[...]

Celebrate this, Rwandan, wherever you are,

The peace for which we fought has come at last.

Here, the Arusha accords are a victory insofar as they make the refugees re-join the national community by reconciling ‘the Rwanda of inside and outside’. Song B similarly celebrates the Arusha negotiations through the prism of unity:

Parties that found many areas of convergence with the Inkotanyi [name of RPF
fighters],

Let’s redouble our efforts to vanquish this common enemy

³² Mahmood Mamdani, *When victims become killers: Colonialism, nativism, and the genocide in Rwanda* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2001), p. 190.

Our fraternal trinity is a patrimonial pact

This excerpt also addresses the issue of ethnicity, evoking the ‘fraternal trinity’ (*inyabatatu*), a reference to Hutu, Tutsi, and Twa, which constitutes a ‘patrimonial pact’, i.e. descended from the same ancestor. The unity of the people is further heralded in Song C, as the cardinal value that also justifies the refugees’ right to return:

Let’s celebrate democracy

Rwanda is ours, no one can contest it

The proof is, we are all from the same father!

[chorus:] The way forward is unity

Everything else is secondary [...]

The true democracy does not practice discrimination

Neither racial nor ethnic discrimination, nor favouritism

All of us Rwandans share our national rights

The idea that the unity must be protected or restored is not exclusive to the RPF. It is a constant feature of Rwandan leaders’ rhetoric since independence.³³ Yet unity was not synonymous with equality between ethnicities for Grégoire Kayibanda and Habyarimana. Both presidents publicly subscribed to an element of the Hamitic hypothesis, portraying Tutsi as ultimately non-indigenous, late-comers on the Rwandan soil, who subjugated the Hutu, and should consequently keep a low profile.³⁴ By contrast, the idea of unity conveyed in the

³³ Deborah Mayersen, “‘Fraternity in diversity’ or ‘feudal fanatics’? Representations of ethnicity in Rwandan presidential rhetoric”, *Patterns of Prejudice* 49, 3 (2015), pp. 249-270.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, Verwimp, *Peasants in power*, pp. 50-52.

songs emphasizes not so much the equality between ethnicities but the irrelevance of ethnicity as a category.

Using the framework presented in the introduction, it is possible to trace how the pre-genocide ideology of unity came to define problems and corresponding interests, as observed through policies, in the post-genocide era. A comparison with the analysis of Johan Pottier or Reyntjens on the RPF's discourse about unity after the genocide reveals that the ideology of unity, as articulated in songs, has survived the genocide virtually unaltered.³⁵ It clearly influenced the framing and understanding of particular social problems after 1994. It made the problem of disunity less a problem of ethnic representation or individual rights than an issue of rediscovering the Rwandan national identity and its immanent 'one-ness'.³⁶ Consequently, the problem of unity has never been interpreted by the RPF as an issue of ethnic balancing in political posts and in the staffing of the state and the army or as a condition of security for each group as in Burundi.³⁷ Nor has it been articulated as a problem of federating nations as in Ethiopia.³⁸

Such problem definition has been consequential in terms of policy ideas: the promotion of unity has been fused with a nation building project (a dynamic absent in Burundi for instance). It has become a project to rediscover "Rwandan-ness" and Rwandan values, and to foster homogenization by undermining other salient identity categories; ethnicity but also regionalism. The RPF has, for example, changed the names of the country's main localities, redesigned administrative boundaries, and instituted a unique nation-wide constituency for MPs elected by proportional representation. Such an ideology of unity is of course conspicuous in the much-commented policy which bans any public references to

³⁵Johan Pottier, *Re-imagining Rwanda: Conflict, survival and disinformation in the late twentieth century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002; Reyntjens, '(Re-)imagining'.

³⁶ Purdeková, *Making ubumwe*, p. 12.

³⁷ Stef Vandeginste, 'Governing ethnicity after genocide: Ethnic amnesia in Rwanda versus ethnic power-sharing in Burundi' *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 8, 2 (2014), pp. 263-277.

³⁸ Jon Abbink, 'Ethnic-based federalism and ethnicity in Ethiopia: Reassessing the experiment after 20 years', *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 5, 4 (2011), pp. 596-618.

ethnicity.³⁹ More generally, policies are geared towards leveraging whatever serves the Rwandan “one-ness” - the discursive emphasis on common values and culture – through a re-imagination of Rwandan “traditions” (as discussed below). Such a conception of unity through homogenization opens the space for the re-fashioning of society, which helps to explain Rwanda’s distinct, and at times unpopular, high-modernist project and attempt to “change mindsets” (as discussed below).

There is no denying that such a conception of unity can powerfully serve RPF interests by supporting its rule. But the idea of a post-ethnic society was articulated long before the RPF gained power and may, in this respect, also reflect a genuine ideal rather than solely a strategy to conceal Tutsi domination. This is further supported if one keeps in mind that these songs, which consistently promoted an a-ethnic unity above all else, were used first and foremost to mobilize and recruit Tutsi fighters.

Singing ideas: an inclusive RPF and a manipulative enemy

The portrayal of the RPF and its enemies is also instructive ideologically. The songs depict the RPF as an inclusive movement by presenting it with a multi-ethnic face and minimising its Tutsi-dominated nature. This has been a constant concern for the Front since its beginning. For instance, at its creation, the RPF pretended that its executive committee was predominantly Hutu.⁴⁰ It also recruited and put Hutu in high positions in the party, as publicized in songs. Song F reminds listeners that some of Habyarimana’s senior officers ‘joined the *Inkotanyi* [name of the RPF fighters], such as Major Lizinde, Commandant Biseruka, and many others.’ Song G gives a central place to Colonel Alexis Kanyarengwe. A high-profile Hutu from Habyarimana’s native region in the North, he was instrumental in the coup that put Habyarimana in power in 1973 and subsequently served as his minister of

³⁹ Vandeginste, ‘Governing ethnicity’.

⁴⁰ Filip Reyntjens ‘Les mouvements armés de réfugiés rwandais: Rupture ou continuité?’, *Civilisations* 40, 2 (1992), pp. 170-182, pp. 176-177.

internal affairs. He fled to Tanzania in 1980 amidst rumours of coup plotting and later joined the RPF. After the death of Fred Rwigema, the charismatic original leader of the RPF, he became chairman of the Front in 1990, although real power remained behind the scene in Tutsi hands. Considering that the UN general Roméo Dallaire described Kanyarengwe as the ‘titular head’ of the RPF, ‘a little uneasy in his leadership role, constantly checking for the reaction of others after making a remark’,⁴¹ it is ironic that in Song G:

Kanyarengwe told Paul [Kagame]
‘Sit so that we can plan
Let’s find how to reach the centre [of the country]

Far from being the uneasy token Hutu with no real power, Kanyarengwe appears as a military strategist, discussing as equal, if not as his superior, with Paul Kagame. He is made the main character of the whole verse, asking Kagame to ‘sit down’ to discuss important strategic matters. Later in the song:

Habyarimana, not knowing what to do,
Used the Hutu and Tutsi ethnicities as a pretext
Colonel Kanyarengwe quickly told him:
‘Stop all this intrigue, it is the source of the misery that has devastated Rwanda
When we parted, you were responsible for it

Here it is Kanyarengwe himself, a Hutu from the North and former member of the *Akazu*, Habyarimana’s inner circle, who admonishes Habyarimana for his divisive politics.

⁴¹ Roméo Dallaire, *Shake hands with the devil: The failure of humanity in Rwanda* (Random House Canada, Toronto, 2003), p. 65.

Songs also portray the RPF as fighting for the common good and not seeking revenge or domination. This can be contrasted with the depiction of the *Inkotanyi* by Hutu extremists as only moved by the desire to subjugate the Hutu population and revert back to the exploitive, Tutsi-dominated *ancien régime*.⁴² The idea of RPF benevolence towards all Rwandans is instilled by emphasising that its fight results from an irresistible longing for the homeland. For example, Song I links the courage of an unnamed *Inkotanyi* hero to his desire to go back to his country:

‘He fights against the enemy that denies him his right to come back home’

[...] ‘Let him fight them and come back to the country of his ancestor, the country of Rwandans.’

The celebration of Rwanda’s beauty is also a way to demonstrate the RPF nationalism. It conveys the longing of the refugees for their homeland. The song *Inganzo y’Umunezero* (song R) epitomizes this. Despite being the official song of the RPF Radio Muhabura, it does not mention politics, the war, or the refugees’ plight once. It confines itself to exalt the wonders of Rwanda, as in this stanza:

What would I mention, what would I leave out?

Among the marvels of this Rwanda

Where to begin and where to stop

To honour and celebrate her?

At the small summits, the hills, the volcanoes?

At the plains and the beautiful valleys,

At the lakes and the forests?

⁴² Mamdani, *When victims*, p. 189.

The emphasis on the RPF's patriotism is elsewhere made more explicit. Song E emphasizes that it is not an alien movement that retains loyalty to the countries its members and supporters had settled in. Indeed, they 'leave definitely foreign countries,' 'without leaving anything behind' because they 'miss Rwanda so much.' The anaphora '*Turaje*' (we are on our way to you) that starts all the 30 lines of the song reinforces the impression that the return is both certain and irreversible. The scale of the return is also massive. It is entire families which are coming back: old people and 'babies hardly weaned off their mother's breast'. The returnees ask to be 'recognized [...] as children of the same father'. In addition, the *Inkotanyi* gives guarantees of their unwillingness to take revenge: they come back 'not to loot', 'without hatred in [their] heart' and with 'no resentment for what happened in the past'. Instead, they want to 'join forces' to 'work for the future of Rwanda' and 'genuine progress'.

Through the songs, the RPF also demonstrates its benevolence by appearing as a legitimate, sensible, and expert actor. This is for instance evident in the evocation of the Arusha peace negotiations. The movement comes across as a trusted negotiating party dealing with other parties on an equal footing as in Song A:

On August 4, we were in Arusha,
The path of the RPF was recognized first
Their poise, their courage and their great expertise,
All parties accepted and signed for this, signed for this!

[...]

Radio Muhabura and Radio Kigali

They showed professionalism and they sent out the news [...]

Both the RPF Radio – Radio Muhabura – and Radio Rwanda [called – perhaps intentionally - Radio Kigali] broadcast the news of the Arusha negotiations, reinforcing the image of equality between the voices of the RPF and of the Rwandan government. Songs also emphasize the educated character of the Front. Celebrating the military progress of the RPF, song H concludes that ‘this demonstrated to the Movement [Habyarimana’s party] that they [the Inkotanyi] really studied.’ Song P similarly explains:

You [Habyarimana] spend your time lying to the people
Like how the Inkotanyi did not study and spoke nonsense,
How do you explain that we have our own radio Muhabura?
Since we are supposed to be uncultured, uneducated?

Such an intriguing emphasis on the educated character of the RPF can be understood as the counter narrative to the Habyarimana propaganda. The regime depicted the *Inkotanyi* as a bunch of uneducated vagrants (*ingengeru*) that grew up in camps abroad, or as the natural enemy of Rwanda (*inyangarwanda*), not refugees trying to come back to their homeland and worth negotiating with. In contrast, the songs promote the idea of a disciplined expert movement that ‘fights in order’ (Song B) with ‘precise and organized objectives’ (Song C) to eventually ‘work for the country with intelligence’ (Song E).

The portrayal of the enemy in songs is also instructive ideologically. While there is some literature on the Habyarimana regime and Hutu extremists’ vision of their enemy, notably through songs,⁴³ works on the RPF’s vision of the enemy are largely absent. The contrast between how each side portrays the other is stark. Whereas the Hutu extremists systematically degraded and dehumanized the RPF, and the Tutsi, viewed as their natural

⁴³ E.g. Jean-Pierre Chrétien, *Rwanda: Les médias du génocide* (Karthala, Paris, 1995).

supporters,⁴⁴ such violent imagery is absent from RPF songs. A distinction is made between Habyarimana and his entourage and the wider (and *de facto* mainly Hutu) population. The blame in songs rarely falls on the population, although the anti-Tutsi popular pogroms since independence are the cause of the refugees' plight. The population is only portrayed as oppressed or manipulated by the regime. The real enemy is Habyarimana and his *akazu*. Song F clearly distinguishes between Habyarimana and the wider population, making the population its victim: 'The Rwanda of Rwandans that you [Habyarimana] debase/ We, the intrepid Inkotanyi, will cure it.' Songs composed during or shortly after the genocide, when the extent of the horror began to be known, are especially interesting to consider in order to explore how the issue of guilt is addressed. Songs J and S, both composed in 1994, come closest to blaming not only Habyarimana and his entourage but also wider sections of the population. Yet, the tone is never vindictive, violent or degrading. Song S, the only song that describes graphically the violence the RPF encountered, only designates the enemy in a non-specific manner, only using the pronoun 'they': 'They decimated the new born and the babies hardly weaned off the maternal breast, even those in the maternal womb were prematurely and violently taken out.' The enemy here is recognized as enemy only through their horrible deeds and not through their identity. In Song J:

Your *Ikinani* was approached and we tried everything to reason with him

The other day he had a nasty surprise for Rwanda

Couldn't you sense the tragedy that was looming?

You had transformed Rwanda into an *akazu*

Those who would not comply became the sworn enemy

This resentment led you to do the irredeemable

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

We tried everything, you just did not want to hear

[...]

The enemy's greatest guilt is to have followed the regime in its folly and not seen 'the tragedy that was looming'. Yet, the enemy here is the enemy only insofar as they have been fooled by Habyarimana. The war and the genocide are the results of the stubbornness of the other side. The self-proclaimed nickname of Habyarimana, *Ikinani*, or the 'invincible one', is used to ridicule him and show his absurdity.

While songs evoke warfare, there is no fascination with or glorification of violence (contrary to genocide discourse).⁴⁵ Violence is presented as the sad, regrettable consequence of the obstinacy of the Habyarimana regime. In all songs, with the exception of Song S mentioned above, the language of violence is subdued, indirect, coated in an epic and heroic language. Overall, depiction of the enemy operates through a great deal of restraint. The restraint is first in scope. The enemy is carefully defined in contrast to the expansive and generalized characterizations from the Hutu extremists. It is not the (mainly Hutu) Rwandan population but the Habyarimana regime and, as discussed below, its foreign patrons. Restraint is also linguistic. Lyrics do not feature hatred of the enemy nor do they use a degrading language. Here there is no use of 'animalization, vulgarity, scatology' or 'pornography' that Hutu power resorted to in its media to designate the RPF, its supporters, and more generally the Tutsi.⁴⁶

These ideas of an inclusive and expert RPF fighting an enemy that is not the entire population, but a manipulative elite, has impacted how the RPF defined problems and policies in the post-genocide era. For example, the overarching problem of rebuilding the

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 376. Translated from the French.

country has also become a problem of giving guarantees to the Hutu majority, a problem that songs allude to when providing re-assurance that refugees are not uneducated thugs ‘coming to loot’. The earliest policy manifestation of this was the effort to include the opposition in the government of national unity and formally stick to the Arusha accords, albeit in an adapted form. As explained by Omar McDoom, ‘although the RPF enjoyed [the] benefits as a result of being an outright military victor, it should be recognized that it chose not to press home all of its advantages. It was not “winner-take-all”’. And yet, other options were available to the RPF: ‘The RPF could for example have ruled as a single party as happened in Uganda after its Bush War which brought Yoweri Museveni’s [National Resistance Movement] NRM to power in 1986 [...] Instead the RPF undertook several, important confidence-building measures designed to reassure Rwanda’s Hutu majority.’⁴⁷ While, for example, the RPF concentrated the power in its hands, ‘it was nonetheless the first time in Rwanda’s post-colonial history that power had been shared even nominally – across ethnic lines.’⁴⁸ This practice has continued ever since. Informally, some ethnic balancing remains a criterion in the allocation of political posts.⁴⁹ More generally, the unusual success of public sector reforms in Rwandan has been explained as an attempt by RPF to demonstrate its expert and impartial character as well as its capacity to deliver development for all citizens.⁵⁰

Similarly, the RPF perception of itself as being destined to give the country ‘back her title of Rwanda’ and restore harmony has been consequential in terms of policy ideas. This mission, combined with the RPF will to appear “expert”, helps to make sense in the policy sphere of the ‘high modernist’ or ‘social engineering’ drive that is the hallmark of Rwandan

⁴⁷ Omar McDoom, *Rwanda’s exit pathway from violence: A strategic assessment* (World Development Report 2011 Background Case Study 62054, World Bank, Washington DC, 2011), p. 11.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁴⁹ Purdeková, *Making ubumwe*, p. 84.

⁵⁰ Benjamin Chemouni, *The politics of core public sector reform in Rwanda* (ESID working paper n°88, University of Manchester, 2017).

post-genocide governance.⁵¹ At a more micro-level, the problem definition of restoring Rwanda's dignity while demonstrating expertise also helps understanding the 'moral authority and paternalism'⁵² of officials who 'know better'⁵³ regularly underlined in the scholarship.⁵⁴ High modernism also serves as the demonstration that the RPF is not the uneducated thuggish group depicted by the previous regime. Such a concern even extends to the president according to Purdeková: 'The bespectacled President of Rwanda, versed in economics and politics, has carefully worked against the popular Rwandan stereotype of a military leader taking over power – the *inkandagirabitabo* or literally "one who marches over the books" – a dismissive reference to ill-educated soldiers in high positions of power.'⁵⁵

Singing ideas: idealization of the pre-colonial past

The songs convey a strong idealization of the pre-colonial past. While several authors have underlined this ideological trait of the RPF, analysis of songs helped to better grasp how this was done and what exactly in the pre-colonial past is celebrated.⁵⁶ Idealization of the past is first achieved by inscribing the rebellion in the precolonial military legend and multiplying references to traditional practices of warfare. In song H for instance, the decision to attack on 1 October 1990 is recounted as follows:

When the challenges set reached their highest level,
The Inkotanyi declared: 'we took an oath
The endless UN [United Nations] way never succeeds'
In broad daylight, we just crossed the border

⁵¹ Malin Hasselskog, 'Rwandan developmental "social engineering" ..

⁵² *Ibid*, p. 63.

⁵³ Reyntjens, '(Re-)imagining', p. 75.

⁵⁴ See also An Ansoms, 'Re-engineering rural society: The visions and ambitions of the Rwandan elite', *African Affairs* 108, 431 (2009), pp. 289-309.

⁵⁵ Purdeková, *Making ubumwe*, p. 229.

⁵⁶ E.g. Johan Pottier, 'Re-imagining Rwanda', pp. 109-123; Reyntjens, '(Re-)imagining'.

The song refers here to the traditional practice of ‘setting challenges’ or *imihigo*, when fighters in the pre-colonial period would compete with one another by publicly pledging to reach ambitious objectives. Songs also use an epic style and portray the war as if fought in a precolonial time. Song G, about the RPF attack, tells this story:

I dreamt that we crossed the *Umuyanja* River [between Uganda and Rwanda]

With my bow on my shoulder

My arrows

My shield and spears

[...]

Song I uses an epic tone to present Fred Rwigema as the figure of the traditional Rwandan hero.

The one who throws himself into battle with courage

The one whose face shows both gravity and determination

The one who never misses his target, loosing off arrows which fly as in a trance

Warfare is depicted in anachronistic terms, especially when talking about weapons. There is no celebration of guns and rifles: the traditional spears, arrows and bows are their metaphors.⁵⁷ Song G calls the RPF fighters *intwaramiheto*, literally ‘those who carry bows.’

⁵⁷ An exception is the song *Abasore Turatashye*, not included in the sample because it could not be obtained in full. The chorus proudly lists the weapons the RPF owns (‘Fourteen, One-Twenty, Sans Recul na Katyusha, RPG...’). However, the point here is probably more to show once again the expertise and modernity of the RPF than a fascination for modern warfare. The song indeed denounces that the regime ‘treated’ the RPF as ‘petty thugs’ [*ingegeera*], which the list of modern weapons aims to contradict.

Overall, the songs implicitly make the *Inkotanyi* the heirs of an epic past of great exploits. The name *Inkotanyi* itself refers to a military formation in precolonial Rwanda under king Yuhi IV Gahindiro. By doing so, they assert the RPF's unquestionable Rwandan character, the legitimacy of its fight for the refugees' return, and celebrates a pre-colonial past of great feats to reconnect with.

A deep anti-imperialist ideology parallels the exaltation of the precolonial past. The misfortune of Rwanda, and more generally of Africa, are presented ultimately as an evil brought by foreigners. Song K, with the revealing title 'Afrika warakubitse' (Africa, you suffered), and song L 'R.P.F. Turatashye' (RPF we are coming back) are the most representative in this respect.⁵⁸ In Song K:

1. It started under the form of a conspiracy
They shared Africa between the three of them,
They divided it in three parts,
Africa found itself muzzled

Chorus: Africa you suffered, Africa you were brought down (x2)

2. They came wearing robes [cassocks], they banned Rwanda's culture
The dance and the gathering around the fire lost their place in Rwanda, plotting
gained acceptance
They demanded to be presented with gifts
They declared themselves Gods before us, we confessed to them our sins!

3. Musinga disapproved of them, denounced them and kept them at a distance

⁵⁸ They also feature in French in Chrétien, *Rwanda: Les medias* but have been here retranslated from Kinyarwanda.

Mandela disapproved of them,...

Rwagasore disapproved of them,...

Nyerere disapproved of them,...

Once in Rwanda, they took the ruler and threw him behind the forest,⁵⁹ they made him the laughing stock of foreigners.

4. Muhumuza disapproved of them, denounced them and kept them at a distance

Basebya disapproved of them,...

Mandela disapproved of them,...

Rukeba disapproved of them,...

Samora disapproved of them,...

Kabarega disapproved of them,...

Once in Rwanda, they took the ruler and threw him behind the forest, they made him the laughing stock of foreigners

5. Some Rwandans served them, were made their instruments

They placed in them the idea of segregation, and the hatred spread

Habyarimana became their client, he chased away the natives, and closed behind them the borders of the country, nostalgia has taken hold of us

6. He instituted oppression and called it the policy of [ethnic] equilibrium

Rwandans suffered, ignorance spread

In schools and in access to jobs, he established ethnic and regional discrimination.

Some natives died in restless wandering as if they had no native land.

⁵⁹ Reference to the fact that the Belgians deposed the king Yuhi Musinga in 1931 and sent him to Kamembe in the far southwestern corner of Rwanda, beyond the Nyungwe forest, before exiling him to Congo.

7. Go, Mutara, you who disapproved of them and kept them at distance, go, we keep
the memory of your deeds
Go, Bisangwa, go, you who had the courage to take your bow against them,
Your predictions came true, the Inkontanyi entered Rwanda
The lies cannot find space to spread anymore, truth prevails in Rwanda,
Habyarimana is vanquished.

The Rwandan figures in the song embody the historical resistance to the colonizers. Biographic elements of these characters are a testament of the anti-imperialist, nationalist and inclusive ideology the RPF is seeking to promote (Table 2).

Table 2: characters in Song K

Character	Description
King Yuhi Musinga (1896-1931)	Tried to preserve his power against the whites, when Rwanda first came under the colonial rule.
Muhumuza	Prophetess in the north of the kingdom who claimed to incarnate the Nyabingi divinity. She resisted the colonizers but also the attempts of the court to control the Hutu northern kingdoms. She was eventually captured by the British in 1911 and died in 1945.
Basebya	Twa who led a revolt against taxation in 1905 in Northern Rwanda. He was tracked and eventually executed by the German in 1911

Bisangwa	Traditional chief and a force commander sent by King Kigeli IV Rwabugiri to fight the Germans South of Lake Kivu in 1896.
François Rukeba	A Hutu who was selected to be the nominal founder and president of the monarchist, Tutsi-dominated nationalist and anti-colonialist <i>Union nationale rwandaise</i> (UNAR) party in 1959.
Mutara III Rudahigwa (1911-1959)	King between 1931 and 1959. He eventually asked for independence. He died in Bujumbura in 1959 while meeting with the colonial authorities, which are suspected to have deliberately killed him.

The choice of Rwandan heroes in the song is eclectic. It is likely to appeal across regional and ethnic divides, reinforcing the picture of the RPF as an inclusive movement. While some are heroes linked to the Tutsi monarchy (Bisangwa, Musinga, and Mutara), other such as the prophetess Muhumuza and the Twa rebel Basebya are figures associated with the history of resistance of the northern Hutu kingdoms to their assimilation in the newly colonized Rwandan kingdom. Interestingly, as showed by Chrétien, some figures were also used at the same time by the opposing side in its anti-Tutsi propaganda.⁶⁰ The famous extremist singer Bikindi, leader of the group *Irindiro*, used the figure of Basebya in his song ‘Sons of the Father of the Cultivators’. By mobilising figures who supported the northern Hutu kingdoms, Bikindi’s aim, according to Chrétien, was to ‘illustrate the pathetic saga of a centuries-long repression of “Hutu kinglets” by the Tutsi’.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Chrétien, *Rwanda: Les medias*, p.358.

⁶¹ *Ibid.* p. 344. Translated from the French.

Significantly, this Rwandan hall of fame is echoed by an African one, featuring the famous anti-colonial figures of Nelson Mandela, Julius Nyerere, Samora Machel, the Burundian Rwagasore, and Kabarega, the king of Bunyoro in Uganda, who resisted the efforts of Great Britain to make the kingdom a protectorate at the end of the nineteenth century. Doing so, the RPF sought to universalize its struggle, making it a fight for Africa more generally. As argued by Roessler and Verhoeven, this Pan-Africanist and anti-imperialist ideology has also to be replaced in the wider context of the African neo-liberation movements of the 1980s and 1990s, such as the NRM or the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), which "arose in opposition to the emergence of a new class of dictators and authoritarian leaders who their critics conceived as neo-colonial for perpetuating policies of social exclusion to advance the interests of the ruling elite".⁶²

Song L also conflates the current problems of Rwanda and the refugees with the issue of colonization, making Habyarimana the whites' servant:

Children of Rwanda, for so many years we have been left to our fate, we have
wandered in foreign countries
But now we are coming home

Chorus : RPF, RPF we are coming home (x2)

2. It is the white man who caused all this, children of Rwanda

In order to find an opportunity to steal from us.

3. When they arrived, we lived side by side in harmony

They were dissatisfied not finding the means to divide us

⁶² Roessler and Verhoeven, *When comrades*, p. 44.

4. They invented and attached origins to us, children of Rwanda: some came from Chad, others from Ethiopia

5. We were a beautiful harmonious tree, children of Rwanda. Some of us were banished abroad, to never come back

6. We were separated by division, children of Rwanda, but the trap of the white man, we identified it and avoided it.

7. This Habyarimana that you see, children of Rwanda, he came round to the whites' plan that wanted to keep us abroad forever.

8. We the Inkontanyi, we reject that, children of Rwanda, we are determined to fight and to vanquish him.

9. Thus, children of Rwanda, we are all called upon to unite our forces to build Rwanda.

The external world here bears the blame for the fate of Rwanda. Colonizers divided Rwandans as they banned Rwanda's culture and tradition, the 'eternal lights' of unity and democracy according to Song C. This argument is extended over time, to characterize the current situation, and over space, to the whole African continent. The whites are also blamed for the fate of Rwandan refugees. Song L even identifies a 'whites' plan' to keep the refugees out of the country. Habyarimana is the lackey of westerners, a neo-colonial tool in the hands of his 'patrons' (Song K). He is regularly ridiculed for calling his white masters for help when in difficulty. Song F explains that:

The armies of the Movement [Habyarimana's MRND ruling party] came running
When they saw us, they immediately ran for their lives
The profiteers [foreigners] learned about it and came running,
Saying 'we are losing a servant!'

Habyarimana roamed foreign countries
Crying in front of the whites for them to rescue him
[...]

Westerners are also blamed for their misunderstanding of the refugees' situation. Song H explains that 'The whites took to their books/To try to understand this war'. This echoes the colonizers' misunderstanding of Rwandan culture and people, which led them for instance to 'invent [Rwandans] origins' as put in song L.

The RPF's idealization of precolonial times along with its anti-imperialism have had clear ramifications in terms of problem definition and policy ideas after the genocide. In terms of problem definition, the ideology has produced an interpretation of the world that is highly historicized and mythicized.⁶³ The ordeal of Rwanda is understood as an aberration of history that the RPF aims to correct. Western powers, who subsequently aided Rwandan neo-colonial regimes, are ultimately responsible for the country's 'fall from Heaven'. The RPF struggle becomes an attempt to end Rwanda's century of shame. From this overarching problem definition logically derive two others: minimising foreign influence and reviving the Rwandan eternal values defiled by imperialism.

On the latter, the main policy implication is that the reviving of Rwandan 'traditional' values is the antidote to the country's fate. As a result, 'in the last two decades, Rwanda has

⁶³ See also Reyntjens, '(Re-) imagining'.

seen a profusion of reinvented “traditional” institutions’,⁶⁴ the so-called “home-grown” solutions. These include for example the *gacaca* courts, the *girinka* livestock distribution programme, the *itorero* civic education camps, the *agaciro* sovereign fund. One of the most famous is the *imihigo*, a term encountered in song H, that came to define in the 2000s the performance contracts that have pervaded the whole state bureaucracy. However, what actually goes on ‘is a skilful government-led reinvention, and often plain experimentation rather than a recovery of activities from the popular pre-colonial past’.⁶⁵ Only a better understanding of the RPF’s ideology and problem definition helps to explain such an apparent contradiction. Tradition in songs is never conservative or reactionary: there are no references to Tutsi elitism, ethnic divides or exaltation of the monarchy. The ultimate problem for the RPF is Rwanda’s lack of unity and values as a result of Western influence, not the disappearance of the pre-colonial order *per se*. Neotraditional practices are, consequently, less about fidelity with history than about activating and drawing on an imagined ideal to foster unity and independence.

Another consequence of RPF ideology in terms of problem-definition is that western influence has to be limited. This helps to better make sense of the ‘regime’s assertive, at times arrogant stance and their often fraught relations with the world’ perceived by diplomats, donors, and scholars.⁶⁶ Such assertiveness is compounded by the idea that foreigners do not necessarily understand Rwanda’s reality. While this Rwandan exceptionalism has been linked to the experience of the genocide,⁶⁷ the songs show that it has older origins. It finds its source in the exaltation of Rwanda’s culture and past, and in the misunderstanding of the refugees’ ordeal. Song B, for example, decries ‘the whites [who] took to their books to try to understand this war.’ As a consequence, aid becomes a double-

⁶⁴ Purdeková, *Making ubumwe*, p. 152.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.* p. 155.

⁶⁶ Reyntjens, ‘(Re-)imagining’, p. 69.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.* p. 70.

edged sword for the RPF. It is needed to restore the country's greatness but is also a potential conduit for neo-colonial domination, thus calling for self-reliance in the long run.

This problem definition has been consequential in the policy realm. Generally, it sheds light on the RPF's will 'to exert considerable agency in the donor relationship.'⁶⁸ Furthermore, policies are logically geared towards reducing aid dependency, frames as an issue of independence but also dignity. As a result, self-reliance receives greater importance in Rwanda than in many other African countries. For example, in 2012, the creation of the *agaciro* [dignity] sovereign fund following aid cuts was presented 'as a common goal against external threat (Western donors), which was perceived to be attacking Rwanda's sovereignty'.⁶⁹ Guarding against foreign actors' interference requires self-reliance at the national but also at the individual level. This has taken the form of a paternalist social engineering project, mentioned above, of 'changing mind-sets' so that people become actors of development, not passive recipients of aid, as observed in social policies. In health for example, ideas played a clear role in the RPF's choice of a compulsory community-based health insurance to improve financial access to healthcare. Although some other policy options were more popular among the population and donors, they were not selected because they were incompatible with the RPF ideology of national and individual self-reliance, which called for a compulsory population-wide contribution.⁷⁰ Similarly, the ideology of national and individual self-reliance has been linked to the strong drive to foster entrepreneurship among youth.⁷¹

Conclusion

⁶⁸ Devon Curtis, 'Development assistance and the lasting legacies of rebellion in Burundi and Rwanda', *Third World Quarterly* 36, 7 (2015), pp. 1365-1381, p. 1373.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 442.

⁷⁰ Chemouni, 'The political path'.

⁷¹ Catherine Honeyman, *The orderly entrepreneur: Youth, education, and governance in Rwanda* (Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2016).

By exploring the ideology of the RPF through songs of political mobilization, this article makes three main contributions. First, it contributes to the scholarship on Rwanda by demonstrating the value of adopting a more constructivist perspective in interpreting the RPF's interests after the genocide. Interests did not emerge in a straightforward manner from the post-genocide structural conditions but were, to a significant extent, constructed through ideas that have remained surprisingly stable over time. Only by reconceptualising 'interests' as a cluster concept that subsumes ideology can it become possible to fully understand why the RPF came to conceive of some of its interests the way it did. It helps to explain, for example, why the RPF, among many options compatible with its 'material interests', chose a particular course of action, for instance resorting to reinvented traditions to legitimize highly experimental, forward-looking policies. The role of ideas is best demonstrated when ideology seems to undermine the RPF's 'objective' material interests. The bulk of the literature on Rwanda underlines that the RPF's top-down, at times coercive, developmental project, and its forced-march reconciliation through ethnic amnesia, creates popular resentments and structural violence that might jeopardize stability in the long run.⁷² How then can we explain that these are so forcefully adopted by a regime so concerned with its legitimacy? Similarly, material interests cannot fully explain the defiant stance towards donors in a context of extreme resource scarcity. For example, in the health sector, the government has sometimes been ready to forego foreign aid for ideological reasons.⁷³ It is only by taking the normative power of ideas seriously that we can explain these potentially self-defeating behaviours. While the literature has emphasized the role of ideology as the instrument 'to legitimize policies that have little popular support',⁷⁴ the opposite is true as well: policies, including those that have little popular support, are, to a significant extent, the consequence of ideology.

⁷² e.g. Thomson, 'Whispering truth to power'.

⁷³ Chemouni, 'The political path', p. 92.

⁷⁴ Reyntjens, '(Re-)imagining', p. 75.

The article does not deny that material interests influence ideas: just because ideas have deep roots does not mean that they were not partly shaped, at some point in time, by material conditions. Nor does it contest that other dynamics outside of ideas also influence interests. Yet, by tracing the pre-genocide origins of ideas and their extraordinary resilience even through the critical juncture of the genocide, the article aimed to establish their genuine power in mediating the effects of material interests in shaping political behaviour in post-genocide Rwanda. The persistence of ideas despite fast-changing material circumstances is perhaps the best demonstration that their link with the material is not direct and that they have more traction and longevity than assumed.

The second contribution to the study of Rwanda is empirical. The article uses new source material, songs of mobilization which are, for their vast majority translated for the first time in English, to systematically delineate the RPF's original ideology. Works concerned with its ideology have used sources mainly from the post-genocide period. As a result, their claims, while valid after 1994, generally lack empirical justification for when the RPF was only a rebellion. This article corrects this while avoiding relying on *ex-post*, and potentially reconstructed and self-serving, narratives. By the same token, the article is able to ascertain a very high degree of continuity in RPF ideology. The ideological themes identified have all survived the exercise of power with no significant alteration since they are present in the literature that discusses the RPF's current ideological stance.⁷⁵ However, since 1994, new themes have emerged or became more prominent: the idea of self-reliance, of Rwanda's exceptionalism, and of developmentalism.⁷⁶ Yet, these did not come *ex-nihilo*. They drew heavily on an existing world vision. The emphasis on self-reliance can be traced back to the RPF's suspicion towards the external world. The idea of exceptionalism already transpires in the songs, through the glorification of Rwanda and through the idea that outsiders since

⁷⁵ cf. *Ibid.*, Purdeková, *Making ubumwe*, Reyntjens, '(Re-)imagining'.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

colonial times do not understand Rwanda's culture. The current ideology of top-down, fast-paced development also draws on a multiplicity of pre-genocide ideological sources: the idealization of Rwanda, the divine mission of the RPF to restore the dignity of the country, and the RPF's vision of itself as an organization that must convince of its inclusive and expert character. In addition, this study uncovers some important ideological themes that further our knowledge of the RPF: the great restraint in its portrayal of the enemy, and an early emphasis on RPF expertise and education as a way to convince others of its benevolence. The songs qualify the image of the RPF as a self-assured force by revealing its awareness of its vulnerability and its vital need to give guarantees, thus shining new light on Rwanda's high-modernist and technocratic drive.

The article has, finally, both methodological and theoretical implications for the study of African politics. Methodologically, it draws attention to the importance of art forms to understand rebel organizations. In general, rebel organizations have very poor institutional memory – compounded by high illiteracy rates amongst rank and file soldiers – that hinders empirical knowledge of their ideology. In addition, rebellion songs allow a direct access to ideological discourse as produced during the war. Mobilization songs are thus methodologically invaluable to reflect on the war-to-peace transition and to analyse something as difficult to observe as ideas. From a theoretical standpoint, this analysis re-asserts the role of ideas as a normative source of transformation. The focus in the study of African politics on the materiality of political behaviour through the prism of clientelism, kinship, belly politics or utility-maximising actors is reductive. Indeed, 'this hyper-rationalist account of behaviour discursively strips Africans of their capacities for political action, emancipatory or otherwise'.⁷⁷ Consequently, the study of the relationship between ideology

⁷⁷ Julia Gallagher, Carl Death, Meera Sabaratnam, and Karen Smith, 'Teaching Africa and international studies: Forum introduction', *Politics* 36, 4 (2016), pp. 441-452, p. 446.

and interests, through the typical African medium of political songs, is also a call for further de-exoticizing and de-pathologizing African politics.