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# DO WE UNDERSTAND LIFE AFTER GENOCIDE? Centre and periphery in the knowledge construction in/on Rwanda

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# **DO WE UNDERSTAND LIFE AFTER GENOCIDE? Centre and periphery in the knowledge construction in/on Rwanda**

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JUNE 2009

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## **ABSTRACT**

A reflection on the existing “constructs of knowledge” on Rwanda reveals that these are rife with contradictory assertions and images. We therefore map “the frontier of knowledge construction”, the centre(s) of society where not only policy is made, but where knowledge is actively construed, managed and controlled. We identify a discrepancy between “image” and “reality” in/on post-genocide Rwanda. We do so to be able to address the fundamental question: “do we really understand life after genocide?” We argue that crucial variables remain un- or under-explored due to an at times active interference in the scientific construction of knowledge; an overall cultivation of the aesthetics of progress and a culturally specific communication code. We analyze the “mise-en-scène” (stage-setting) of Rwanda and argue for greater attention to the “mise-en-sens” (meaning-giving and overall direction). We stress the need to carry out a adopt a bottom-up perspective in order to capture the voices of ordinary people.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>ABSTRACT</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>1. INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>2. GOUREVITCH'S "THE LIFE AFTER" AS CASE STUDY</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>3. THE AESTHETICS OF PROGRESS OR "THE RWANDA WE CANNOT SEE"</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>4. THE ETHICS OF DISSIMULATION: THE REPORTER AT LARGE CAUGHT IN THE FORCE OF CIRCUMSTANCE</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>5. UNDERSTANDING JUSTICE-GOVERNANCE-DEVELOPMENT IN RWANDA: A DIFFICULT EXERCISE.</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>6. THE "SCIENTIFIC" CONSTRUCTION OF KNOWLEDGE: FOUR EXAMPLES</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>7. CONCLUSION: FROM THE MISE-EN-SCÈNE (STAGE-SETTING) TO THE MISE-EN-SENS (PUTTING INTO MEANING/DIRECTION)</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>REFERENCES</b>	<b>21</b>

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The post-genocide Rwandan regime is often hailed for its remarkable socio-economic recovery after the total destruction it experienced in 1994. But the regime is also often portrayed as an increasingly authoritarian state with political dignitaries, ordinary people and members of the international community all submissive to the rules, regulations and discourses laid out for them as in a 'rehearsed participation in public affairs.' (African Peer Review Mechanism, 2005: 58). One can find the most divergent claims and conclusions on all themes constituting the post-conflict agenda: the justice-security-development nexus, while governance as an underlying factor cross-cuts the former three (Uvin, 2007: 41). The lack of consensus on the post-conflict achievements and essential ingredients of Rwandan society signals an apparent difficulty, if not impossibility, to separate image from reality, the imaginary from the real.

We undertook 20 months of fieldwork in rural Rwanda between 2004 and 2008. This paper is a reflection on the practice of doing research in and on Rwanda. It is equally a reflection on the way knowledge is being generated in and on Rwanda.<sup>1</sup> A combination of obstacles encountered during our fieldwork necessitates this reflection. First and foremost there is the difficulty of gaining access to the "field". The term "field" refers to the geographical area of Rwandan rural life where the majority of the population lives but also to the thematic domain of research topics such as ethnicity, governance, justice, poverty, inequality, democracy etc. . These topics are, due to a range of reasons that we will explore in this paper, largely under- or unexplored variables in post-genocide Rwanda. Secondly, this reflection is the result of the experience of the sheer impossibility of communicating findings on the nature of rural life, and the under-currents of social processes at work, to the urban (foreign) residents of Kigali. Rwanda's capital Kigali functions as the outpost of progress where Rwanda is presented and experienced as the beacon of hope, development and change on the African continent. Rwanda has indeed experienced a gigantic leap forward since the total destruction experienced in 1994. But we argue that some trends often remain hidden from view and can only be discerned when looking below the surface appearances. This is however a difficult exercise.

We start with the close examination of a text by Philip Gourevitch on the life after the genocide. This case-study is used to point out the difficulties in the understanding of post-genocide Rwanda. We highlight a general problem of taking the "mise-en-scène" (stage-setting) for granted instead of actually capturing the "mise-en-sens" (meaning/overall direction). We show that difficulties in interpretation are wide-spread in the literature on Rwanda in general. We ask ourselves the question of why it is difficult to come to a balanced understanding of Rwanda and we question the reasons underlying the sheer impossibility of mapping the status of the essential ingredients of Rwandan society. We argue that the cultivation of an aesthetics of progress; the culturally specific ethics of dissimulation and an active interference in the 'scientific' knowledge construction lie at the heart of difficulties in understanding life after genocide.

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<sup>1</sup> The nature of the knowledge construction in and on post-genocide Rwanda has previously been documented in Pottier (2002).

## 2. GOUREVITCH'S "THE LIFE AFTER" AS CASE STUDY

An example of the difficulties in understanding post-genocide Rwanda is the article by Philip Gourevitch on Rwanda entitled "The Life After" (Gourevitch, 2009a)<sup>2</sup>. Gourevitch had been a reporter in Rwanda in the immediate aftermath of the genocide and published a widely read book (Gourevitch, 1999). His initial book was severely criticized for its one-dimensional understanding, or at least rendering, of things. (Pottier, 2002: 56-57 & 168-169).<sup>3</sup> A 2009 trip brings him back to Rwanda where he, as the sub-title suggests, finds that "the reconciliation defies expectations" and that "there is a possibility of peace" as he concludes in the last sentence of his piece. These claims, however, are the result of replacing reality with image, facts with discourse. Although Gourevitch has interesting and revealing encounters and insights during a trip in the countryside, he is unable (or unwilling) to use these experiences to start questioning the glittering surface appearances and the discourse of the new Rwandan elite. We will explore in more detail his interpretation of life after genocide to clarify the issue. The last section of his article deals with Rwanda's involvement in Congo, but we focus on the first part that deals with the situation inside Rwanda and where he 'twists' the evidence to come to a conclusion that he cannot make.

Gourevitch starts his article with a summing-up of the achievements of Rwanda's leadership and the positive trends in Rwandan society:

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

A bit further he adds a bucolic touch:

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

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<sup>2</sup> The theme developed in that article and the problems we discuss in this paper is even more 'present' during his talk with editor of the New Yorker. The audio fragment can be heard at: [http://www.newyorker.com/online/2009/05/04/090504on\\_audio\\_gourevitch](http://www.newyorker.com/online/2009/05/04/090504on_audio_gourevitch) (Last accessed: May 11, 2009.)

<sup>3</sup> See also the comparison of the books by Gourevitch and Alison Des Forges on Rwanda (Straus, 2000).

every so often an imposing red brick church on the summit, its bell tower cut against a hazy, cloud-spattered sky.” (Gourevitch, 2009a: 39).

So far, he in fact only describes what indeed can be seen in Rwanda. Either due to the fact that these evolutions are really taking place or due to the window-dressing activities we will discuss later on. And his descriptions of the Rwandan countryside are a combination of a fact of nature and his talent as a writer. More problems arise when he also assumes the claims by the Rwandan leaders that are usually his interlocutors and guides. Kagame himself tells him that “Ten million people now in this country have never been happier in the history of this country. It’s better, Rwanda, far better than it has ever been. I have no doubt about that.” (Gourevitch, 2009a: 38). Kagame gives him the task “to look around, go around, go to the villages”, and that if he fails “to see the sense of hope in their eyes, then I won’t be telling you the truth.” (Gourevitch, 2009a:38).

What he subsequently describes related to the Gacaca process and the perception of ordinary people on the Gacaca is what everybody who has spent a significant amount of time in the rural areas of Rwanda has to conclude: nobody likes Gacaca; it is not working very well and it is not bringing reconciliation, nor justice. The ‘killer’ Girumuhatse explains that reconciliation and confessions ‘is a program of the state’. Mariane, the survivor, dismisses the request for pardon etc as ‘theatre’, a performance in the interest of the state. The young survivor questioned by Kagame on ‘how he manages’ in his neighborhood with the killers of his family members released from prison says in fact that he ‘is not managing at all’. He just pretends to get along. Gourevitch’s friend in Kigali confirms that ‘they talk about reconciliation, but that it is the reverse’. Survivors hear about reconciliation on the radio, but it does not mean a lot to them since it will not bring back their family. So, the snapshot he took is rather bleak. And it is, indeed, only a snapshot. We will return to both issues, the bleak picture and the snapshot approach.

Fear, distrust and a lack of empathy for the others position are rife in the narratives collected by Gourevitch. The existence or signs of the existence of the opposite sentiments would be an indication of a “reconciliation process that defies expectations” as his title suggests. But Gourevitch did not find these sentiments. Nevertheless, through his overall tone, general descriptions as the ones quoted above and failure to take into account the meaning of the narratives collected he reverberates Kagame’s claim that people have “never been happier”. Gourevitch gives priority to the overall, almost visual impressions he has when roaming Kigali and Rwanda. And he prioritizes the discourse laid out for him by his ‘elite’ interlocutors and disregards the voices of ordinary people.

Kagame gives him the task “to look around, go around, go to the villages”. Gourevitch is at least honest when he says that, no, he “[...] didn’t see any great hope in the eyes of the people I visited [...]”(Gourevitch, 2009a:42). What he describes does indeed not allow him to come to this conclusion. Nevertheless, he tries to twist it around again: “[...] but when I travelled around Rwanda there was a greater sense of ease among people than I remembered.” (Gourevitch, 2009a: 42) Again: he tries to align his experience with the dominant image and discourse fabricated in the centre of society. ‘A greater sense of ease’ than when? Than 1995-1996 probably. When he was there to write his first book. To no surprise: they were still virtually killing each other in 1995. And they were living in an environment of total destruction and the absence of any functioning state structure or service delivery. Survivors



were still totally traumatized at that time and 'non-survivors' (Hutu) were chased by RPF troops to either be killed or put in prison. Militias and other armed groups connected with the former regime made incursions into Rwanda from the camps in Congo to continue attacks against Tutsi. In that sense, yes, it's better in 2009 than during the genocide or the immediate aftermath.

Moreover, does he find any evidence in the periphery of society that Rwanda is "better than ever", as Kagame suggest? Not really. The survivors say: it is better than twelve years ago. No surprise since they had just experienced the apocalypse 12 years earlier. But they add: "economically, it was better before '94" (Gourevitch, 2009a: 42). Gourevitch raises the issue during his talk with Rwarakabije, the former military commander in the Rwandan army (FAR) under Habyarimana. And later he headed the armed rebellion (FDLR) against the new regime. Recently, he left the rebellion and joined the new Rwandan national army. The man does not even want to say anything when he is asked whether today is better than before the genocide. Instead, Gourevitch finds evidence that the mindset that structured the violence in 1994 is still present and that a large part of the population does not feel 'liberated' by the RPF military overthrow in 1994. To the contrary, they suggest that they expect a liberation from the RPF not by the RPF. When Girumuhatswe was in prison they hoped Hutu on the outside of Rwanda would liberate them. Supposedly not only from prison and it is not sure that Girumuhatswe does not continue to think the same nowadays. And Rwarakabije is still identifying himself with his former 'job', his former 'project' and his former 'army' apparently. He continues to talk of 'we' when he is referring to the FAR or FDLR although he is in the Rwandan Defense Forces (RDF) now. Does this not also mean that he not really feels part of that new project? Isn't this something else than 'the possibility of peace' he is talking about at the end of his article? An attentive reader cannot be convinced or should at least ask these questions.

Gourevitch refers to the fact that a survivor had accused Rwarakabije of participation in the genocide during a commemoration ceremony with the president and other dignitaries present. These accusations were probably true. Kagame admits that Rwarakabije was nevertheless not processed in the post-genocide justice system. Since they needed him he was instead recycled in the new regime. It proves that the entire justice process is 'political'. How did it feel for the old man who raised the issue when the 'big men' start laughing with his claim. That is where respect for survivors ends: when power is at stake. If ordinary Hutu would show this kind of disrespect - that would be 'genocide ideology'. And also here Gourevitch fails to fully appreciate the consequences of this insight. Does it not also mean that this politico-justice system can change the 'protected' status of people who are currently in the grace of the regime? And that this will probably be the case when they stop acting as puppets of their masters? And what does this reveal about the entire justice system in Rwanda? And might this not be one of the reasons why reconciliation is not easily forthcoming? Is it not this attitude and approach that explains the sentiments Gourevitch uncovered during his talks in the countryside? Is it not the facilitation of reconciliation and at the same its obstructing through these kind of actions that results in the status-quo he discovered? Gourevitch fails to ask these questions.

By asking these questions Gourevitch would start moving away from the centre of society where knowledge on Rwanda is constructed. He would be questioning the visible and he would start understanding the actual meaning and direction of life after genocide. But the reason why Gourevitch fails to ask these questions is not only due to unwillingness. It is also the

result of factors that make it hard to understand the meaning of life after genocide. A reason to bring them into focus here.

### 3. THE AESTHETICS OF PROGRESS OR “THE RWANDA WE CANNOT SEE”

Fellow journalist Kinzer endorses Gourevitch’s approach when he claims that “the Rwanda that foreigners who live there see is the real one.” (Kinzer, 2008: 331) Kinzer himself applies this principle with great rigor. A close examination of his work on “A Thousand Hills” reveals that he does not speak with ordinary Rwandans but prefers to speak for them<sup>4</sup> based on what he sees. And hears, but mostly through the conversations he has with his elite partners during his lengthy stay in the urban and posh environment of the *Hotel Des Mille Collines*. His assumption that the foreigners who stay in this urban environment see the real Rwanda is not really the case, for two reasons. Firstly, foreigners do not often cross the rural-urban divide and thus have a hard time grasping that world that lies beyond the outpost of progress, the capital Kigali and its aesthetics of modernity. Secondly, image control also implies an active pursuit and a mastery of the aesthetics of progress of which some features are transported into rural Rwanda.

Most Rwandan observers and foreigners working in the country are reluctant to leave the beaten track and never really cross the rural-urban divide. It is obvious that the occasional visitor is often even more confined to the urban sphere, with some snapshot impressions from what lies beyond the capital city. There is an urban bias in the understanding of Rwanda. A global assessment of the working of the Department of International Development (DFID), the agency representing Rwanda’s biggest donor - the United Kingdom - reveals that the staff stationed in Rwanda has the fewest working days outside the working station in the capital compared with any other DFID posts in the world! (National Audit Office, 2007: 27)<sup>5</sup> DFID staff is only spending one day a year in rural areas, as few as the staff working in Afghanistan. However, there are without any doubt good reasons not to go into the countryside in Afghanistan. And they are spending less than the two days staff are spending in rural areas in Uganda or the ten days spent in the interior in Tanzania. The auditor recommends the overall necessity in all locations where DFID is present for regular “reality checks” to understand how their programmes are affecting poor peoples’ lives.

Such a “reality check” is not only almost totally absent in Rwanda up to today but also hard to undertake. An ambitious and internally coherent national ideology and vision on progress is translated onto the rural local level. Measures are not only taken by coercion irrespective of real-world considerations but they also result in changes in image and not necessarily reality.<sup>6</sup> Table 1, for example, details a range of forbidden or compulsory activities.

When considering the contents of the proposed measures, the underlying objective is clear: increasing the standards of health and hygiene, a laudable policy initiative in itself with - without any doubt- also productive results. The consequence, however, is that a significant part

<sup>4</sup> Susan Thomson pointed out that Kinzer speaks for ordinary Rwandans and not with them. Personal communication.

<sup>5</sup> A similar observation is made in an evaluation of the 2000-2005 DFID country programme in Rwanda. A programme characterized as ‘insufficiently informed about implementation realities on the ground.’ Kanyarukia et al, ‘Evaluation of DfID Country Programmes: Country Study Rwanda 2000-2005’, (DfID Evaluation report EV660, 2006, DfID, London). Cited in (Holvoet & Rombouts, 2008: 592).

<sup>6</sup> The fact that local authorities are appointed makes the chain of accountability go upwards towards higher authorities and not downwards to the population. As a result do the local administrative personnel implement orders received from the central government in Kigali. On the nature of the local governance structure see Ingelaere (2007a: 36-41).

of rural dwellers will “look” less poor and traditional, but will “be and feel” as poor or even poorer as before.<sup>7</sup>

**Table 1. System Of Fines Used To Implement Measures Improving General Wellbeing**

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

Source: Letter from a District Mayor addressed to the Executive Secretaries at the sector level - - Fieldwork observation June 2006 – Northern Province

When considering the contents of the proposed measures, the underlying objective is clear: For example, the clothing rule requires that everyone wears shoes (*Inkweto*). Not wearing shoes means exclusion from public places such as markets and being sent away during official government reunions. Peasants cannot live up to these demands because of financial limitations or because these measures deprive them from the basic needs to survive. Therefore, sometimes, they end up in the local *cachot* (jail) for non-compliance. Obligatory monetary investments or fines of 10.000 Rwandan Francs are not adjusted to the circumstances of rural life in the hills. The only strategy to regain freedom is to borrow money from family and friends, which burdens them with debts and thus more poverty. Another strategy is to mimic the policy of image control. During fieldwork we noticed men and women walking to official reunions while carrying shoes “on their heads”. They had made serious investments to buy new shoes as required by official policy and these monetary investments had, therefore, to be handled with the utmost caution and care to keep them “intact”. Only when

<sup>7</sup> This theme is further developed in Ansoms (2009). The engineering aspect of the Rwandan post-genocide regime is also documented in the description of rural life on one hill in central Rwanda in Ingelaere (2006: 29-91).

approaching the area where government officials (sometimes together with foreigners coming to visit “the project” or something else “developmental”) were waiting them, would they put on their shoes. After the meeting and out of sight of the eyes of the state and possibly foreigners gazing on, shoes would be placed on the head to walk home barefoot. In sum: they had quickly mastered the ways to achieve the approval of state power in the microcosm of their rural hill. In a similar fashion did national authorities manipulate the gaze and endorsement of the world powers looking on: through the aesthetics of display.

Gourevitch undertook a “reality-check” and went into the countryside. What he saw was real but without any doubt influenced by the cultivation of a positive image detailed above. Although it was important that he crossed the rural-urban divide, his trip into the countryside was nothing more than an occasional visit to one or a limited number of localities and one, or at best, some interviews.<sup>8</sup> It is however interesting to see that Gourevitch is very much aware of the dangers of such a ‘snapshot’ approach. He denounces the ‘snapshot’ approach in his theoretical reflections on the Abu Ghraib events in Iraq in a piece entitled ‘The Abu Ghraib We Cannot See’ (Gourevitch 2009b: 10)<sup>9</sup>. He nevertheless fails to apply his own theory when he is trying to understand Rwanda. He develops a sophisticated reflection on the limits of photographs and isolated images when he discusses the atrocities in the Abu Ghraib prison and the fact that these were documented by photographs as snapshots of history. He notes:

“Crime-scene photographs, for all their power to reveal, can also serve as a distraction, even a deterrent, from precise understanding of the events they depict. Photographs cannot show us a chain of command, or [...] decision making. Photographs cannot tell stories. They can only provide evidence of stories, and evidence is mute: it demands investigation and interpretation.” (Gourevitch 2009b: 10)

It is clear that the notion “photographs” can be replaced with the “snapshot visit” to a single locality. Gourevitch’s short visit to the hill called Taba in Rwanda, indeed, lacks investigation and interpretation. “Investigation” would mean placing the experience he has and the narratives he collects in the context of the locality of a living community (a hill) with a history, a social tissue and social groups, economic infrastructure and activities, a governance structure and power relations at work. “Investigation” would mean that one had to compare these insights gathered in that particular place with findings coming from other localities in Rwanda in order to establish the breadth of processes. It would allow for an understanding of the “field” instead of ceding the “field” to the discourse of the most important political player(s). We have pointed out above that it is exactly the latter that Gourevitch does in his piece on the life in post-genocide Rwanda. But he might submit a plea in mitigation calling on “the force of circumstance”.

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<sup>8</sup> It would be important to also discuss the presence of the journalist/researcher on the spot and the actual interview procedures. Note that Gourevitch’s translator replies to a statement of Girumuhitse with “yeah, they all say that.” If this intervention took place in the presence of the interlocutor it is, of course, unacceptable. Such a statement uttered by a Rwandan translator will without any doubt send a signal to the respondent and influence the perception he has of the interviewer and the answers he ‘needs’ to give.

<sup>9</sup> I would like to thank David Newbury for bringing my attention to this op-ed contribution. The implications of the reflection on photography it has for Gourevitch’s article on the life after genocide in Rwanda were suggested by David Newbury.

#### 4. THE ETHICS OF DISSIMULATION: THE REPORTER AT LARGE CAUGHT IN THE FORCE OF CIRCUMSTANCE

The control of the aesthetics of display and progress results in the fact that the images one contemplates when roaming the country turn out to be superficial and thus misleading. For example when cruising the central boulevards of Kigali or on the rare occasion of “passing” the countryside to visit “the project” or attend “a seminar” in the provincial towns of Gisenyi or Butare. Undertaking a “reality check” requires an unconstrained period in rural Rwanda to collect “stories” if one were to develop a bottom-up perspective on essential features of contemporary Rwandan society, going beyond official discourse and window-dressing. However, an additional difficulty arises; something much more subtle and resulting from the fact that a particular ideological framework is widely propagated in the countryside during awareness campaigns and during meetings with authorities and military commanders. This has installed a far-reaching self-censorship among the population with regard to elements that do not fit into the official ‘public transcript’. Official policy not only controls the hygiene of bodies, but also the hygiene of minds. Although this is a legitimate concern considering the hate campaign that engulfed the country in the beginning of the nineties, but “re-education” often also involves “political indoctrination”.<sup>10</sup>

When de Lame conducted fieldwork in the late 80s she stated that meetings in the Rwandan socio-cultural universe – whether festive communions, ritualized public drinking activities, or “politico-private” gatherings – ‘serve to transmit meaning, provide the instruments of memorization, and create *consensus*.’ (de Lame, 2005: 303). This bias for consensus was only enhanced after the 1994 genocide, given efforts to restore order and maintain security. The violence experienced during the 1994 genocide and war from 1990 destroyed the Rwandan social fabric; the result is that distrust is pervasive. There has followed a zealous campaign to eradicate “genocide ideology” (Republic of Rwanda, 2006).<sup>11</sup> Sensitization campaigns, commemoration ceremonies, speeches by dignitaries and re-education programmes, the so-called *Ingando* and *Intorero*, needs to adjust the desired image of Rwanda.<sup>12</sup> These endeavors to control people’s thoughts are not only taking place on specific occasions during retreats or yearly gatherings but have become a continued process. The weekly *Umuganda* communal labor activities taking place at the local level concludes with a discourse pronounced by centrally appointed, but locally operating leaders on a theme chosen by the government and even published in the “official gazette”. All of this has instilled a high degree of self-censorship among the Rwandan peasant population.<sup>13</sup> We identify the vectors of this “rehearsed consensus”.

On the one hand there is the idea, ideology of *Rwandanicity* or *Rwandanness*, meaning that Rwandans were one before the arrival of colonialism (Republic of Rwanda, 2006a: 167-185). Colonial powers created ethnic groups out of a harmonious and equal society to rule on the basis of these divisions. The creation of these divisions was the starting point of the genocide culminating in the 1994 mass slaughter of Tutsi. A second vector is the idea of

<sup>10</sup> On the thin line between re-education and indoctrination see Mgbako (2005).

<sup>11</sup> Republic of Rwanda, *Genocide Ideology and Strategies for its Eradication*, (Government of Rwanda, Kigali, 2006). Footnote 5 to 7 in the report (p. 17) gives concrete examples of instances of “genocide ideology” and reveals its wide-ranging scope.

<sup>12</sup> For a detailed discussion of this ideological framework during the Gacaca activities see Ingelaere (2007b & 2009)

<sup>13</sup> The Kinyarwanda word *Kwibwizira* entails this idea of auto-censorship. It expresses the image that people do what authorities want them to do without the latter asking them to do so or without using coercion.

“liberation”. The RPF stopped this divisionism not only in its deadly manifestation during the actual killings in 1994 but also through its policies in the post-genocide period. The RPF abolished ethnicity and created one big “family” (*umuryango*) for all Rwandans. The “genocide ideology” is the third vector. Negative forces are still present in and outside Rwanda continuing to embrace the old and longstanding genocidal tendencies. Guidance from within the liberation movement of the RPF is necessary to fully embrace the new regained order of *Rwandanicity* and “consensual democracy”, free from the perils of ethnicity and the whims of dictatorship.

This “rehearsed consensus” is the dominant and dominating discourse in post-genocide Rwanda. While an outsider to Rwanda and Rwandan culture would consider the message(s) that are part of this “rehearsed consensus” as true or as referring to an existing reality, they are not necessarily experienced as referring to an existing reality by Rwandans. An understanding of the cultural conception of the *ubwenge* is however necessary to fully appreciate the nature of communication in Rwanda.<sup>14</sup> This complex notion incorporates a range of elements. In the broadest sense does it refer to intelligence resulting in self-controlled public acts. Apart from an overall principle structuring behavior and display, *ubwenge* also refers to a specific way of communicating. In the traditional organization of Rwandan society did speech acts not only correspond with reality. What one said did not necessarily correspond with what one thought. It was the status connection between the interlocutors or the broader relationship with the socio-political environment surrounding the interlocutors that needed to be served in the communication. The word was a means to an end, not so much an end in itself. From a Judeo-Christian and western perspective would the latter be the truth and the former a lie. But in the Rwandan context did and do truth and lies stand in a dialectical relationship. The Rwandan system of communication was (and is) *esoteric*: statements at the same time reveal and conceal.

Often, outsiders to Rwandan culture fail to take this into account. As Gourevitch rightly points out in his op-ed on the documenting of American atrocities in Iraq, snapshots (be it pictures or occasional visits to the countryside) “[...] can only provide evidence of stories ... [they] demand investigation and interpretation.” (Gourevitch, 2009b: 10). Especially when one is aware that reality is not necessarily that what one is told it is. The nature of the interpretation of life after genocide would improve when taking this communication code into account. In addition, one could for example consult the results of carefully conducted fact-finding mission or scientific research undertaken by internationally respected institutions. But also in this ‘genre’ Rwanda is characterized by a multitude of findings and interpretations. We provide an overview of some of the results of this difficult exercise.

## **5. UNDERSTANDING JUSTICE-GOVERNANCE-DEVELOPMENT IN RWANDA: A DIFFICULT EXERCISE.**

The tension we identified in Gourevitch’s work is often observed when comparing the writings on Rwanda.<sup>15</sup> We provide some examples. After the consolidation of the political transition through the 2003 presidential elections, Reyntjens observed ‘cosmetic operations for international consumption’ in the realm of governance and he summarized the nature of the

<sup>14</sup> Apart from our own field experience and information gathered during fieldwork we rely on: de Lame (2004); Rukebeshu, (1985) Overdulse, (1997); Ntampaka,(1999); Lestrade (1972); Crepeau, (1985).

<sup>15</sup> Moreover, he would need to adopt another “method”. Currently he operates as a writer looking for interesting stories, generalizing from the particular. David Newbury pointed out this issue in an e-mail conversation with René Lemarchand.

regime that came about as a dictatorship, an environment that is 'a fertile breeding ground for structural violence' that might lead to 'acute violence' (Reyntjens, 2004: 210). But Stephen Kinzer finds the opposite of such a 'closed and repressive place' in 2008 when he concludes his 'progress report' on the achievements of post-genocide Rwanda and the role of its leader, Paul Kagame. He is convinced that Rwanda will not descend into hell again but, instead, it even 'seems at least possible' that Rwanda will be pulled out of poverty 'in a generation or so' through, among other things, 'visionary leadership' (Kinzer, 2008). World Bank researchers also noted in 2003 that 'considerable progress has been achieved over the last ten years in a range of areas' (World Bank, 2004: 1). The report signals a macro-level economic recovery and concludes that although efforts will have to be made 'social indicators are clearly improving for Rwanda's next generation' (World Bank, 2004: 1). Ansoms (2008) however questioned the fact whether this better future for Rwanda's next generation will also include the mass of rural poor since growth-policies turn out to be not so pro-poor as the rhetoric suggest, an argument that is underscored by survey results revealing growing inequality since 2002 (Republic of Rwanda, 2006).

The World Bank report (2004) also refers to significant steps forward in the domain of reconciliation and asserts that the Gacaca court system has been 'instrumental in advancing reconciliation and accountability following the genocide.' The post-genocide Rwandan way of dealing with the past, and the Gacaca process in particular, received wide attention as well, often with the same diverging analysis. Clark (2007) argues that the hybrid nature of the Gacaca system is an asset to the process, while others identify it as the weakest link in the system (Ingelaere, 2008: 25-29). Some argue that the Gacaca process not only fosters reconciliation, but instigates a democratic culture of deliberation and dialogue as well (Wierzyńska: 2004), while others see Gacaca as 'an exercise in victor's justice, coercing participation, restricting freedom of speech on sensitive subjects, and collectivizing guilt' (Waldorf, 2006: 85). While a minister in 2007 claimed that 75% of Rwandans 'are reconciled' (The New Times, 12 April 2007), others disqualified the reconciliation process stating that post-genocide justice in Rwanda comes down to a return to the feudal period with slavery and subordination for Hutu (Centre de lutte contre l'impunité et l'injustice au Rwanda, 2005). In a more recent discussion on the nature of the Rwandan justice system Human Rights Watch concluded after three years of research that the judicial system operates in a political context '[...] where there is an official antipathy to views diverging from those of the government and the dominant party' (Human Rights Watch, 2008, 2). An element that is detrimental to fair trial guarantees. Schabas undertook the same exercise and refutes most of the claims by Human Rights Watch and typified certain perspectives on Rwanda as '[...] unrealistic assessments of problems that are more imaginary than real' (Shabas, 2008, 59).

Considering the diverging accounts detailed above, the question arises: is this the same country? The lack of consensus on the post-conflict achievements and essential ingredients of Rwandan society signals an apparent difficulty, if not impossibility, of separating image from reality, and isolating the imaginary from the real. Even in well-researched reports and scientific writings. As with Gourevitch's text on the life after genocide: the question is why?

## 6. THE “SCIENTIFIC” CONSTRUCTION OF KNOWLEDGE: FOUR EXAMPLES

In some cases, the differences in understanding of Rwanda and conclusions on the achievements in the post-genocide period can simply be attributed to a, often politically motivated, hidden agenda that necessitates the “twisting” of the evidence or the selectivity in the sources. An example is the pseudo-scientific document presented by the new “friends of Rwanda”.<sup>16</sup> The text is minimizing the short-comings in important governance issues in current Rwanda. At the same time is the nature and scale of the violence and human rights abuses committed by the RPF rationalized. But the previous regime also has its ‘friends’ that are as selective in their sources and as biased in their reading of history. Some deliberately minimize what happened in Rwanda in 1994; take shortcuts one cannot possibly take when identifying the onus of responsibility for the 1994 carnage and fail to acknowledge the improvements since the years of total destruction (Péan, 2005). These writings are easily unmasked as “motivated” and “biased”.

We leave aside the more fact-finding oriented approaches. Fact-finding reports often give rise to controversy and receive an almost standardized denial in response when conclusions are not in line with official discourse.<sup>17</sup> We focus on large-scale research undertakings labeled ‘scientific’. Or at least where there is a consensus that the findings were derived through a scientifically sound procedure. Deniability is more difficult, intervention more complex. It nevertheless happens.

A first problem is related to the fact that the understanding of Rwanda focuses on the genocide and is dominantly “top-down”. Since mid 1994, dozens of works have been published on Rwanda. As Peter Uvin phrases it: “[...] There has been an explosion of writing on this hitherto almost unknown country” (Uvin, 2001: 76). Most address one or more of the elements to understand or explain the genocide. Longman identifies the need to conduct local-level research in order to further substantiate insights on different aspects related to the Rwandan genocide in general (Longman: 2004). What is lacking is a systematic investigation and analysis of the micro-level processes at work in smaller communities in Rwanda (Uvin, 2001: 97-98). This is however not only the case for the genocide but especially for the post-genocide period. Much work needs to be done but nevertheless did the results of studies and research projects on a range of post-conflict reconstruction issues become available over the past years. Rwanda is heavily researched compared to, for example, neighbouring Burundi. This attention is the result of its dramatic history that is almost mediagenic and thus interesting. The fact that the country is highly efficiently organized also contributes to the fact that research is rife. Administrative structures are branched deep into rural life. All of this makes it possible to initiate large-scale research projects of all sorts. Rwanda is equally a research heaven for smaller projects often undertaken by master students. The relative regime stability and the good security situation (the absence of war and other forms of physical violence) functions as necessary pre-requisites for most research activities. But the knife cuts both ways. The fact that the state apparatus functions as a well-oiled machine also results in the omnipresence of the ears and eyes of the state to control what is and can be researched.

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<sup>16</sup> Friends of Rwanda, “Passing Through the Fire. Rebuilding Rwanda after the 1994 genocide.” See: <http://www.friendsofrwanda.com/> (Last Accessed May 10, 2009).

<sup>17</sup> Examples are abundant, to give just one: ‘Mixed Reactions on MHC report’, *The New Times*, Kigali, 10 October 2008.



The main difficulty to come to a balanced understanding of life after genocide is thus not so much practical or organizational in nature but related to the fact that Rwandan politics actively controls the (scientific) knowledge production when deemed necessary by the regime and whenever possible, as previously also documented by Pottier (2004).<sup>18</sup> On several occasions in the recent period there has been active interference in (the interpretation of) scientific research to guarantee the propagation of an image in line with the official 'vision' and to make sure deviating 'knowledge' would remain unknown.<sup>19</sup>

We provide four examples of where this has taken place. The first two are known since findings were made public but refuted; in the latter two cases interference occurred before results were made public (and the consequence was that research findings were not made known).

**The World Food Programme.** In the first months of 2006, a famine struck the food economy zone of *Bugesera* located in Northern Burundi and Southern Rwanda. The World Food Programme issued a report with alarming figures based on research undertaken by the organization.<sup>20</sup> The Burundian government acknowledged the problem, demanded assistance from international aid agencies and urged Burundians to help their fellow compatriots in need.<sup>21</sup> Even though this is an agricultural and climatic zone shared by both countries, the response of Rwandan officials was to refute the claims and to argue that the data were incorrect.<sup>22</sup> A report by the International Federation of the Red Cross (2007) only released in 2007 reveals that the Red Cross launched an emergency appeal to assist vulnerable families in the same period. Eventually action was undertaken and food distribution took place. Moreover, the author of this paper was undertaking field research at the time in villages located in that part of Rwanda. Hunger was rife among the population. Some people were eating grass and other weeds due to a lack of food. This firsthand evidence substantiates the claims of the WFP report. This suggests that the reason the report and the existence of hunger were denied by the Rwandan government was not so much a consequence of relying on "incorrect data" as seeking to promote a vision of a self-sufficient, efficient country, where there was progress and the desire to propagate this vision to the outside world. Hunger could not form a comfortable part of this picture, so in reality it had to be denied.<sup>23</sup>

**The United Nations.** The Human Development Report issued by the UNDP and entitled *Turning Vision 2020 into Reality. From Recovery to Sustainable Human Development* acknowledged the fact that Rwanda experienced substantial growth since the end of the genocide. The report states that the global Millennium Development Goals or the Rwandan equivalent "Vision 2020" might be reached in the future. However some serious shortcomings

<sup>18</sup> We focus on scientific research in this paper and leave aside the fact that also the freedom of the press is under pressure in Rwanda. See Waldorf (2007).

<sup>19</sup> One also has to take into account that one needs to have permission of the necessary governmental bodies to conduct field research. Therefore, certain research activities are never undertaken or tremendously adapted to predict outcomes because (initially) not in line with the official policy and "vision". Apart from the examples referred to here and involving international (research) institutions several examples can be cited of researchers who in the context of academic research – Phd. or other – ran into serious trouble in Rwanda, especially while doing research with "ordinary people" in the countryside. A researcher was forced to undergo a re-education tour after having presented the intermediary results of her findings based on fieldwork with ordinary Rwandans. See Thomson (2009).

<sup>20</sup> '1.8 Burundians face grave food crisis', *PANAPRESS*, 19 January 2006.

<sup>21</sup> 'Nkurunziza urges Burundians to assist famine victims', *PANAPRESS*, 20 February 2006.

<sup>22</sup> 'Hunger: Government refutes WFP claims', *The New Times*, Kigali, 14 Mai 2006.

<sup>23</sup> Filip Reyntjens refers to this way of handling things as 'a characteristic of dictatorships more interested in their international image than the survival of their population'. (Reyntjens, 2007: 6) (translation by the author).

and crucial challenges were identified, including a rise in absolute poverty, in inequality levels and the need for much greater investment in the agricultural sector. The quality of governance and depth of democracy also needed to be improved to guarantee long-term stability, according to the UNDP. This report was “not accepted” by the Rwandan cabinet. The minister in charge of economy was asked to refute the report. He promptly did so, even after having previously written the introduction to the report. The UNDP was pressured to release a statement admitting the report contained unfounded and misleading information. The lead researchers – a Rwandan and foreign national – were blacklisted.<sup>24</sup>

**The National Unity and Reconciliation Commission.** For several years the National Unity and Reconciliation Commission (NURC) has been undertaking large-scale surveys on factors affecting social cohesion and reconciliation. This work has been undertaken through a specialized INGO and is financed by important donors. As the results of initial surveys became available after some time, the study design was adapted in such a way that longer-term changes could be identified concerning specific themes and topics in the research. From the start of the Gacaca activities nationwide in 2005, however, these survey results stopped being disseminated to a wider audience. The official reason given for not releasing the findings was that the intention existed to bundle the findings with the aim of presenting several years’ findings together to produce a more “comprehensive oversight”. However, there is one version of the report circulating in diplomatic circles and that reveals that findings themselves are more probable the cause for these “delays”. This unauthorized report reveals a critical assessment of the impact of Gacaca activities on social cohesion and reconciliation in Rwanda in 2005-2006; this finding is also not in accordance with the dominant discourse on the Gacaca process that the government wishes to make known and most probably the reason why a release was initially “postponed” (Republic of Rwanda, 2007). Strangely enough, in the same period and with result not being released, a minister refers to statistics from the NURC when he asserts that 75% of the population has reconciled.<sup>25</sup> But eventually an official report was made public in 2008 most probably since the existence (not the contents) of these survey results was known. The increasing request by donors interested in social developments in the country and NGOs working in the domain of reconciliation necessitated the release of the findings. The report reveals the main results already reflected in the previous unauthorized version and depicts - apart from some positive evolutions related to specific themes - an overall bleak picture of the impact of the Gacaca process on social cohesion. Its release was not widely publicized and thus went unnoticed to a wider audience (Republic of Rwanda, 2008).

Moreover, the report concludes with the assertion that “it is important for analysts and policymakers to properly “read” these sentiments, triangulate them with other information or data that this survey cannot provide” (Republic of Rwanda, 2008: 79). A footnote suggests that especially ‘qualitative individual interviews or focus groups’ could provide important additional insights. A strange suggestion, since this has been undertaken in 2006 by the same NURC and its logistical partner in order to better understand the quantitative results.<sup>26</sup> But the remark becomes meaningful when considering the fact that the findings were not made public because of “ideological” or “political” reasons. The results of the qualitative research provided useful

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<sup>24</sup> ‘I did not read UN report before launch – Musoni’, *The New Times*, 24 August 2007.

<sup>25</sup> ‘75 percent of population have reconciled - James Musoni’, *The New Times*, Kigali, 12 April 2007.

<sup>26</sup> Author’s interview with a Rwandan field researcher part of the ‘qualitative’ research group and study. The qualitative study and the existence of the results were confirmed by an official of the National Service of the Gacaca courts – Interview, Kigali, April 2007. A field guide with questions used during focus group discussions is on file with the author.

insights in the reasons of some overall unexplored tendencies and unexpected negative opinions by survivors or prisoners. Narratives from the qualitative research gave insight in the reasons why 80% of respondents questioned the veracity of testimonies in Gacaca in the 2006 survey. But a government official responded that the findings gathered during these focus group discussions to elucidate why people thought the truth was not surfacing in the Gacaca activities was irrelevant. The government departed from “the people that are of the opinion that the truth surfaces in Gacaca and Rwanda.”<sup>27</sup> End of research.

**The World Bank.** In 2005, the World Bank embarked on a heavily financed and innovative multi-country study of micro-level and longitudinal determinants of movements out of poverty. The idea was to replicate research design, methodology and apply similar questions across different countries and thus to allow for cross-country comparisons to be made. Rwanda was one of the countries selected for the research, together with Tanzania, Uganda, Senegal, Mexico, India, Afghanistan and China, among others.<sup>28</sup> An underlying idea of this research was to explore the “expansion of freedoms” developed by Amartya Sen (1999), the exercise of basic rights and the ability to participate in democratic institutions in different countries. The study used survey techniques capturing and comparing longitudinal data from before the genocide and 2005. It was also based on qualitative interviews and observations on participatory decision-making at local and national levels. After six months of study and the collection of hundreds of survey questionnaires and numerous other primary data sources the government security forces seized at least half of the data on the pretext of the presence of “genocide ideology” in the research design and study content.<sup>29</sup> Rwandan enumerators were questioned by the police and foreign researchers implementing the study were summoned by the Criminal Investigations Department (CID). After a long period of negotiations between high-level World Bank representatives and several Rwandan ministries, ministers and other government officials, the decision was taken to destroy all data and abandon the research project altogether. It was clear that the results of the research could be harmful for the Rwandan establishment since questions on democracy and freedom were central to the study, while the longitudinal set-up made a comparison between pre- and post-genocide Rwanda possible, but apparently this was seen as undesirable in case unfavorable comparisons arose. The raw data were never analyzed because destroyed.

## **7. CONCLUSION: FROM THE MISE-EN-SCÈNE (STAGE-SETTING) TO THE MISE-EN-SENS (PUTTING INTO MEANING/DIRECTION)**

An active interference in the scientific knowledge construction implies that even the reports one reads in the offices in Kigali, or Washington, New York, London, Brussels, The Hague, Copenhagen or other capitals around the globe, are not always as complete as expected. The above are four related – but separate - instances of explicit and manifest ‘information management’ (Reyntjens, 2004: 197) which took place in terms of the scientific construction of knowledge. These practices further underscore Pottier’s (2002: 207) observation that “reality is what Rwanda’s political leaders, as moral guardians tell the world what it is.” The

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<sup>27</sup> Interview with official of the National Service of the Gacaca Courts, April 2007.

<sup>28</sup> The author was employed as a long term consultant for the World Bank stationed in Rwanda at the time, supervising together with two other foreign researchers the design and implementation of the study and the fieldwork activities in the Rwandan countryside.

<sup>29</sup> The study was not stopped by a dialogue between the government of Rwanda and the World Bank, but by ordering police officers and other security agents to place a significant part of the enumerators and logistical partners employed by the World Bank under police surveillance after seizing all the data carriers these people had in their possession.

Rwandan establishment operating in the centre of society is keen on getting the preferred image of Rwanda get adopted. As we have shown it actively pursues this objective in various ways through controlling knowledge construction: through the active interference in scientific research projects; through the cultivation of the aesthetics of progress and through the subtle use of a complex communication code.

Any attempt to understand post-genocide Rwanda needs to be aware of the “mise-en-scène” we analyzed in this paper. Future attempts to generate insights on post-genocide Rwanda require innovative approaches if they are to produce useful results. One has to move beyond the ‘mise-en-scène’ and towards the ‘mise-en-sens’: the meaning of life in the periphery of Rwandan society and the overall direction post-genocide Rwanda takes.

In Rwanda, there is a second world lying beyond political control or correctness, beyond ‘rehearsed consensus’ and the ‘mise-en-scène’. There is the need to carry through a ‘copernican turn’ in the knowledge construction on Rwanda by replacing a focus on the centre with insights from the periphery. The acts of ‘investigation’ Gourevitch deems necessary to arrive at a ‘deep’ or ‘thick’ interpretation of the life after should thus result in an approach and research activities that go well beyond ‘the outpost of progress’. Understanding the process of living the Rwandan political transition from one regime into another and from ‘peace’ over ‘violence’ into ‘peace’ again will have to take into account the particular ‘forces of circumstance’. In any case it needs to go beyond the single visit and the personal, literary reflection. Taking all the above-mentioned obstacles into account, one of the most important options available is to undertake lengthy and repeated periods in the field far away from the centre of society, the use of adapted research techniques, a substantial amount of primary data and experiences and a thorough understanding of the socio-political and cultural context one is working in. And this to capture not only trustworthy statements but especially certain undercurrents of social processes at work, the hitherto unobserved variables. In general, these undercurrents will only come to the surface during ‘rare moments of political electricity when [...] the hidden transcript is spoken directly and publicly in the teeth of power’ (Scott, 1990: 14) In the absence of such events, one has to find an interpretation of the ‘cryptic and opaque’ (Scott, 1990: 137). It is a difficult, but necessary exercise.

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