

Singing the Struggle: The Rwandan Patriotic Front's ideology through its songs of liberation

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Abstract

This article studies the Rwandan Patriotic Front's (RPF) ideology as articulated before the genocide. To do so, it identified, transcribed, translated and analysed 20 songs of RPF members and supporters composed before or around 1994 to understand how, before reaching power, the RPF made sense of its environment and the issues it faced, how it envisioned the proper order of society, and how such order was to be achieved. Analysis focuses on four main themes: national unity, the RPF's depiction of itself, the depiction of its enemy, and its relation to the international community. The article shows that the RPF articulated early on a coherent ideology that has endured over time and continues to shape its current policies. It nuances the commonly held view of the RPF as an organisation using ideas only as tools of power. The RPF is a political organisation in which ideology is not solely the result of objective interests but plays a critical role as a motivation for action and as a mental model through which these interests are identified and articulated

Keywords

Rwanda, Rwandan Patriotic Front, ideology, ideas, songs, rebel movement transitions, post liberation.

1. Introduction

The Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF)'s ideology has played a significant role in shaping Rwanda's post-genocide trajectory. Its impact has been recognised as substantial on social and economic policies, its relations with the international community, and its project of national reconciliation (e.g. Behuria 2016, Chemouni 2016, Reyntjens 2016). Yet systematic analyses of the RPF ideology remain scarce¹. In addition, they are mainly based on the RPF's discourse and actions in the post-genocide period, when the RPF was already a successful rebellion-turned-ruling party. This is unsurprising as early ideological statements of the RPF are extremely rare. Reyntjens (2016: 62) notes that, among all the pre-genocide RPF statements and radio broadcasts he reviewed, none contain significant ideological substance. Only the RPF minimalist eight-point political programme circulated in 1990 included some broad ideological reference to national unity, democracy and a self-reliant nation (ibid.). Consequently, missing from the analysis is a systematic study of the early RPF ideological discourse. This article aims to fill this gap by exploring the RPF ideological project as articulated before and around the genocide using songs of RPF members and supporters.

In doing so, the article provides a new empirical contribution to the understanding of Rwanda's ruling party² by translating and analysing songs that supported the movement in its early days. It also opens the possibility of exploring the evolution of the RPF ideology over time as the period of analysis in this article is precisely bounded (1988-1995) and can serve as a basis of comparison with the RPF's current ideological discourse. Often, the RPF ideological stance has been presented in the literature as a self-serving strategy geared towards the reinforcement of the RPF's power. Ideas are treated as the results of objective interests, as the instrument to manipulate external audiences, whether these are domestic or international (e.g. Pottier 2002, Reyntjens 2013, 2016). Reyntjens exemplifies this point of view when he writes that "the regime has used ideology as a tool to deflect domestic and international criticism and control the population, in other words as a mean to maintain power" (2016: 61). This article nuances this view. It argues that there exist strong continuities between the pre-genocide ideological discourse when the RPF was not in power and the post-genocide ideology. The RPF ideological worldview is not solely a function of the imperatives of power. It is also a coherent ideology, stable over time and propagated within the RPF long before it turned into ruling party. While serving the RPF's interests, ideology should not be seen necessarily as their direct consequence.

This paper is organised in four sections. The first engages in a discussion on the concept of ideology before presenting the research methodology. The second section is empirical and presents an analysis of the songs centred on four main themes: national unity, the depiction of the RPF, the depiction of its enemy, and its relation to the international community. The third section discusses the evolution of the RPF's original ideology and how it has shaped Rwanda's post-genocide governance. The last section concludes by reflecting on the importance of ideology for understanding post-genocide Rwanda.

1. One exception Reyntjens (2016). Other works have explored the RPF ideology in only an incidental manner.

2. Most works on the RPF date back to the 1990s. E.g. Reyntjens (1992), Prunier (1988; 1993), Reed (1996), Ottunu (2000).

Singing ideologies

Ideology can be broadly understood as “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” (Denzau & North 1994: 4). This definition draws attention to two important points. First, while ideology can be an individual-level concept, it can also be shared in a group (see also Gering 1997: 970). Second, ideology has both a normative dimension, specifying how the world should be, and an instrumental one, specifying the means to attain such an ideal (see also Seliger 1976: 11, Erikson & Tedin 2015: 70). Exploring the ideology of the RPF through its songs consequently focuses on three aspects: asking what vision and interpretation of the world its members articulated; what was, according to those members, the proper order of society; and how such order was to be achieved.

As it is not possible to observe directly people’s mental models, ideology can only be observed indirectly. In the general absence of RPF ideological statements before 1994, we propose to take the liberation songs of the RPF and its supporters as a window on the RPF’s ideology. Songs have regularly been used to shed lights on the ideas, aspirations, and demands of liberation movements across Africa, for instance in Uganda (Katumanga 2007), Somali (Legum 1963), South Africa (Gray 1999; le Roux-Kemp 2014), Zimbabwe (Pongweni 1982; Pfukwa 2008) or Namibia (Mbenzi 2015). This is unsurprising as songs play an important role in liberation movements. Like songs of social moments, they help to educate members, sympathisers and the wider population regarding the movement’s cause (Rosenthal 2001). They lift spirits of members and facilitate their mobilisation. Songs also help to recruit sympathisers by making the movement more exciting and appealing, or by providing a compelling validation to emerging political identities (ibid.). Songs are consequently a prime site to observe ideology since their functions of education, mobilisation, and recruitment 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 RPF apparatus of political education. They were essential to the *ikitamaduni* evening gathering of singing and dancing organised by political commissars. *Ikitamaduni* could take place in *ingando*, the movement’s political education camps during and after the war. Referring to the encampment area in precolonial Rwanda where soldiers would receive their brief before an expedition (Rusagara 2009: 193, in Clark 2010: 105), *ingando* were already used by the RPF in its days in Uganda (Clark 2010: 105). They were inspired by the Ugandan *chaka-mchaka*, used by the National Resistance Movement/Army (NRM/NRA) as political education camps for soldiers or as mobile schools for indoctrination of the population (Katumanga 2007 in Clark 2010: 105). In the bush, around the fire, soldiers could spontaneously break into a song typically to promise an exemplary punishment to Habyarimana, to recount the feats, often exaggerated, of recent fights, or celebrate the return to the motherland. Singers regularly competed and the best were praised. But the importance of songs in circulating ideas went beyond the RPF itself. Even before the attack of the RPF in October 1990, songs were the means of identity expression and collective memory among its supporters in Rwanda and abroad. Audio tapes circulated covertly among families to foster nostalgia and the hope of the return of those who had fled Rwanda. They were also smuggled in and out of the country. Sometimes, music was without explicit ideological content but their political character lay in the rhythm and melodies with resonances from the pre-revolutionary period. After the RPF attack, tapes became a means to communicate the reasons of the war, news from the frontline, and a collective hope. These tapes could of course attract trouble if discovered by the Rwandan police and gendarmerie during the “opérations de pacification”, the frequent raid and search operations after October 1990.

Singing together secretly was to show the belonging to a common cause, a hidden transcript of resistance to the Habyarimana regime. Second, songs were a powerful means of expression for the RPF and its supporters because they are traditionally a crucial form of artistic expression in Rwanda. Rwandan culture is a culture of words. In the virtual absence of visual arts, aesthetics has been expressed through extremely rich verbal and musical arts (Smith 1985). Singing has always been present throughout Rwandan society, in every milieu from the court to the poorest family, and could take many forms such as songs, poetry or panegyric recitations (Ganseman 1988: 26-27).

The twenty songs selected for this analysis 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 sympathisers (Table 1). Although not from the RPF directly, they are a testimony of the atmosphere and worldview that RPF supporters (or its constituency) were harbouring. All songs are in Kinyarwanda, except the song “Hatuwezi Kurudi Nyuma” (Song O), which is a kind of “kinyarwandised” Swahili. It reflects how Swahili has been used at times as a lingua franca in the RPF, especially for young people who, living abroad, had lost the Kinyarwanda of their parents. As in the Ugandan NRA, it was also the language used to issue military orders, which reflects the original Tanzanian training support to some of NRA and RPF most senior members.

Many RPF songs of the liberation struggle exist. All are not necessarily recorded and some are probably already lost. Identifying them, recording them, transcribing them and translating them is consequently a continuous process, and the list of songs presented here is far from exhaustive. For this article, we have limited ourselves to analysing songs that we identified as revealing in terms of their ideological content and/or their being especially renowned. As can be seen from Table 1 below, analysis is limited to the period of the liberation struggle, i.e. pre-genocide period or around the genocide. Whole songs, or excerpts from them, have been quoted in the text when particularly illustrative. Songs were elaborated in a decentralised manner, by the RPF cultural troupes or by refugees and RPA soldiers. They were often 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 when many versions could be identified. It concentrates on the lyrics but does not engage with the essence of performance: the rhythm, the intonation of the voice, etc. While such elements can constitute a source of political message, their analysis goes 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	Icyicaró	Our seat	Indahemuka troupe ³	Just before the Arusha accord (1992-93).
Song B	Inkotanyi duhuje amarembo	Inkotanyi let's agree to take the same path of entry	Indahemuka troupe	1991-92
Song C	Twirimbire demokarasi	Let's celebrate democracy	Indahemuka troupe	1993
Song D	Girubuntu	Express your humanity through a flow of generosity	Women group from the diaspora	1991-91
Song E	Turaje	We are on our way to you	Women group from the diaspora	1990-92
Song F	Iya Mbere Ukwakira	October 1 st	RPF fighters	1990-92

3. The RPF cultural troupe.

Song G	Mbabwire inzozi narose	The dream I had	RPF fighters	1990-91
Song H	Ndate Ubutwari Bw'inkotanyi	Let me celebrate the heroism of Inkotanyi	Indahemuka troupe or RPF fighters	1991-93
Song I	Iribori ry'u Rwanda	The intrinsic beauty of Rwanda ⁴	Imaculée Mukandoli	1995
Song J	Ngizo zaje Izamarere	Here come the brave fighters	Fanny Gatera and Muyango	1994
Song K	Afrika warakubitse	Africa you suffered	RPF fighters	1990-91
Song L	RPF Turatashye	RPF we are coming back home	RPF fighters	
Song M	Intsinzi	Victory	Maria Yohana Mukankuranga and Angelic Garuka	1992
Song N	Intare	The Lion ⁵	Annonciata Kamaliza	1992-93
Song O	Hatuwezi kurudi nyuma [Swahili]	We can never retreat	RPF fighters	1991
Song P	Mbega Urugendo Rurerure	What a long journey	RPF fighters	1990-91
Song Q	Turatashye Inkotanyi z'Amarere	We are coming home, intrepid Inkotanyi	Indahemuka	1990-91
Song R	Inganzo y'umunezero	The inspiration of Happiness	Cécile Kayirebwa	1988
Song S	Inganji Iganje	The undeniable supremacy	Immaculée Mukandoli ("Inshongore")	1994
Song T	Gisa Shingiro ry'intwari	[Fred] Gisa [Rwigema], the pillar of heroism	Jean-Marie Muyango and the Imitali group	1994

Ideology through the liberation songs

Unity and the relation to the nation

The most striking aspect when analysing liberation songs is their obsession with the idea of unity. Unity is the most conspicuous theme. Nearly all of the songs analysed here at some point refer to the common identity of Rwandans. Unity appears as the most important goal of the RPF, before other aims such as military victory, liberation of Rwandans, or the development of the country. Unity, however, is not something to be created by the RPF, but merely reinstated through the struggle. It is an immanent characteristic of Rwanda, momentarily undermined since colonisation, and waiting to be fully recovered.

This is first conveyed by the celebration of an eternal, a-temporal national unity embodied by an idealised Rwanda. Song A for instance celebrates the Arusha negotiations, stating that:

4. Literally, Iribori are the stretch marks on the skin, traditionally a sign of beauty of the well-fed women.

It serves as a metaphor of the beauty coming from inside, engendered by the person itself.

5. Refers to the RPA officer Védaste Kayitare, nicknamed the Lion for his courage. He died in September 1993.

When the world heard the news [of the Arusha negotiations], it was not surprised
The Rwanda of Gasabo had become an example!

Here, the Rwanda that has triumphed over her divisions, through the negotiations at Arusha, is designated by the “Rwanda of Gasabo”, i.e. the original Rwanda. Gasabo is the region near Lake Muhazi from which the embryonic Rwandan kingdom expanded around the 15th century (Vansina 2004: 11, 217).

The idea of the eternal, unified Rwanda is also promoted by linking unity with the spiritual world of the Rwandan God, *Imana*. However, there are no references to Christianity in the songs and spirituality is considered exclusively pagan and pre-colonial, which is unsurprising given the strong anti-imperialist ideology of the RPF (see below). This is in stark contrast to the Hutu Power movement, which regularly used Christianity in its propaganda (e.g. Chrétien 1995: 326; 373; 376). The eternal sacred Rwanda of *Imana* is synonymous with harmony. Its beauty is celebrated with almost mystic undertones and implicitly presented as tainted by Habyarimana. Song P for example portrays the eternal, magnificent Rwanda as tarnished and underlines the exploitative nature of the Habyarimana regime:

God of Rwanda that sees everything,
Our Rwanda has gone awry
Other countries mock her
Those who inhabit her are at their worst
They have been burdened with heavy tax for years

Erasing the stain of disunity then becomes a divine mission for the RPF. Only when Rwanda is restored as peaceful and united can she regain the 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
Foreigners will be welcome and will reinforce our achievements
They will call her the perfect pearl

[...]

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

Besides the idealisation of Rwanda, the idea of unity manifests through the celebration of the indivisible character of its people. This is the direct rejection of the ideology of the First Republic that portrayed Tutsi as an “*alien element*” barely tolerated in the Hutu nation (Mamdani 2001: 135), and of the Second Republic which, while promoting ethnic appeasement (Prunier 1998: 76), treated Tutsi as second-class citizens and extolled the virtues of being Hutu (Verwimp 2013: 44-52). As a result of the RPF attack, radical Hutus reverted to a discourse akin to that of the First Republic, portraying the Tutsi as a foreign minority within Rwanda, which was defined as a Hutu nation. The RPF constituted an invading force aiming to exploit the Hutu (Mamdani 2001: 190). In contrast, the songs of the liberation struggle systematically emphasise the belonging of refugees to the national community.

The unity of the Rwandan people is underlined by presenting them as the children of the same land, and of the same father, the Rwandan God *Imana*, the “Comforter that made us inseparable”, as in song B above. It is also celebrated through the political events of the time, for instance the 1993 Arusha negotiations 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 negotiations are celebrated as a victory insofar as they are a further step towards unity and helping the Rwandan refugees re-join the national community. The negotiations indeed “reconcile the Rwandan of inside and outside”, underlining later in the song that the Inkotanyi want the peace for this “country that saw their birth.” Song B similarly celebrates the Arusha negotiations as the reflection of the unity of the Rwandan people:

Parties that found many areas of convergence with the Inkotanyi,
 Let’s redouble our efforts to vanquish this common enemy
 Our fraternal trinity is a patrimonial pact
 That Gihanga [the Founding Father] has bequeathed to us
 This way our motherland will live in peace

The concern for unity is presented as shared by all political parties, and disunity as a common enemy. This excerpt also addresses the issue of ethnicity, invoking the “fraternal trinity”, a reference to Hutu, Tutsi and Twa, before adding that they constitute a “patrimonial pact”, i.e. descend from the same ancestor. Song M uses the same expression of fraternal unity (*inyabatatu*), asserting that “Rwanda belongs to the fraternal trinity”.

The unity of the people is further heralded in Song C, as the cardinal value from which everything proceeds: truth, democracy and development. The statement of these values is the occasion to reiterate the legitimate belonging of Rwandan refugees to the Rwandan nation:

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

It [democracy] does not practice regional favouritism or favouritism of a particular group
It does not squint, whereby some would be considered and others forgotten
It torments no one, abandoning no one to exclusion

[...]

Full democracy is born out of unity
Culture and tradition are its eternal lights [...]

It is important to note that historically, the idea that the unity of Rwandans must be protected or restored is not exclusive to the RPF. It is a constant feature of Rwandan leaders' rhetoric since independence (Mayersen 2015). Yet, under Kayibanda and Habyarimana, unity was not synonymous with equality between ethnicities. Both presidents publicly subscribed to the Hamitic hypothesis, portraying Tutsi as ultimately non-indigenous, late-comers to the Rwandan soil, who subjugated the Hutu, and should consequently keep a low profile (ibid., Verwimp 2013: 50-52). In contrast, the idea of unity conveyed in the liberation songs emphasises not so much equality between ethnicities but their irrelevance as a category.

Portrayal of the RPF

The portrayal of the RPF in songs is another window into its ideology. It further shows that its worldview is post-ethnic, as the Front presents itself as an inclusive movement. The RPF also emphasises its commitment and professionalism in fighting for the common good. In doing so, it offers an obvious counternarrative to the Habyarimana regime's and Hutu extremists' representation of the RPF as a Tutsi movement of thugs, coming to loot Rwanda and subjugate the population.

A multi-ethnic, inclusive organisation

The songs are first the opportunity to portray the RPF as a multi-ethnic and inclusive organisation. Since its creation, minimising its Tutsi-dominated nature has been a constant concern for the Front (e.g. Des Forges 1999: 535-7). For instance, the RPF pretended falsely at its creation that its executive committee was predominantly Hutu (Reyntjens 1992: 176-177). It also regularly put Hutu in high positions in the party. Songs mentioned prominent Hutu RPF figures. Song F reminds listeners that some of Habyarimana's senior officers "joined the Inkotanyi, 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 internal affairs⁶.

6. Other high profile Hutu who joined the RPF before 1994 include the politicians Seth Sendashonga and Pasteur Bizimungu, who became President of the Republic after the genocide.

He fled to Tanzania in 1980 amid rumours of coup plotting and later joined the RPF⁷. After the death of Fred Rwigema, the charismatic leader of the RPF, Kanyarengwe became nominal chairman of the Front in 1990, although real power remained behind the scenes 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” (Dallaire 2003: 65), it is amusing that Song G tells this story:

Kanyarengwe told Paul [Kagame]
 “Sit so that we can plan
 Let’s find how to reach the centre [of the country]”
 On all borders, we stationed our young people
 Some crossed from the South, others the North,
 Some in Rusumo, others in Gatuna,
 Still others through Gisenyi, I will cross through Murera
 We will meet there [in Rwanda].

Far from being depicted as the uneasy token Hutu with no real power in the RPF, Kanyarengwe appears as an influential military strategist, discussing as equal, if not as superior, to Paul Kagame. He is made the main character of the verse, asking to 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
 Get ready for the fight, we will defeat you, we are determined!”

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

An educated and legitimate force.

Through the songs, the RPF is also portrayed as a legitimate, sensible actor in Rwandan politics. This is visible for instance in the evocation of the Arusha peace negotiations. The movement appears as peaceful and reasonable, dealing with other parties on an equal footing. In addition, the songs convey the image of an educated RPF, composed of capable people. Song A states, for example:

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

[...]

7. At the same time, Major Théoneste Lizinde, also a Hutu from the North, was imprisoned. He was freed in January 1991 when RPA troops took over his prison, and joined the Front.

Radio Muhabura and Radio Kigali

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

Here, the RPF is exemplary, expert and reasonable in the negotiations. Both the RPF Radio – Radio Muhabura – and Radio Rwanda [called Radio Kigali in the song] broadcast the news of the Arusha negotiations, reinforcing the image of equality between the voices of the RPF and those of the Rwandan government.

Similarly, Song H underlines that the RPF is an educated and expert movement, not the amateur thugs presented by the regime. Celebrating the military progress of the RPF, the song concludes that “this demonstrated to the Movement [Habyarimana’s party] that they [the Inkotanyi] really studied.” Song P is the most explicit in challenging the narratives of the enemy by emphasising the educated nature of the RPF:

You 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 a frequent emphasis on the professional and educated character of the RPF can be surprising but constituted the counternarrative to the Habyarimana propaganda. The regime depicted the inkotanyi as a bunch of uneducated vagrants (*ingengeru*) or as the natural enemy of Rwanda (*inyangarwanda*), not refugees trying to return to their homeland, worth negotiating with. The songs in contrast promote the idea of a disciplined, expert movement that “fights in order” (Song B) for a legitimate cause with “precise and organised objectives” (Song C) and can be trusted as a negotiating party. As expressed in Song E, the RPF is on its way to Rwanda “to work for the country with intelligence.”

A fight for the common good, not for revenge

Songs are also the occasion to portray the RPF as an organisation fighting for the common good, not to seek revenge or tyrannise. When asked about the emphasis on the expertise of the RPF in the songs mentioned above, an ex-RPA soldier replied that it was to show that “we are fighting for a purpose, not just to capture and kill” and that “we could manage the captured area” and were “ready for peace”⁸. This must be contrasted with the depiction of the Inkotanyi by Hutu extremists as moved only by the desire to subjugate the Hutu population and revert to the exploitative, Tutsi-dominated *ancien régime*. Indeed, at the time “many inside the country agreed that the RPF rule would mean nothing but the return of Tutsi domination” (Mamdani 2001: 189.; see also Chrétien 1995: 113).

The idea of the RPF’s benevolence towards all Rwandans is first distilled by emphasising that its fight results from an irresistible longing for the homeland. Song G for instance states:

We said: let’s go home, it has been too many years
We were deployed in all corners [of the country], they heard talk of us
Those who had news about us said: those are the Inkotanyi
See the children of Rwanda that come back from exile, where are they going?

8. Conversation with ex-RPA member, 22/07/2017.

Song I similarly links the courage of an unnamed Inkotanyi hero to his desire to go back to its 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 yearning for the homeland is also visible through the celebration of its beauty. Song M, for example, heralds that “the water pure and delicious/can be found at home” and that “the beautiful hills, children of Rwanda, are typical of Rwanda” and “as for the plains, they delight the fine spirits.” Despite being the official song of the RPF’s Radio Muhabura, the song *Inganzo y’Umunezero* (song R) does not even talk about politics, the war or the refugee question. It confines itself to mention the wonders of Rwanda to convey the longing for the homeland, 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?

Song E stresses patriotism, further emphasising that the RPF is not an alien movement that retains loyalty in the countries in which its members and supporters had settled. 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 30 lines of the song reinforces the impression that the return is both certain and irreversible. In Song E, the return is also massive. It concerns all ages, gender and occupations. Not only fighters but entire families are coming back: old people, “babies hardly weaned off their mother’s breast” and young children with the traditional hair style of youth. The song emphasises that the RPF and its followers “are going home.” They ask the population to be “recognised [...] as children of the same father” and to prepare a big bed, following the Rwandan tradition of preparing the bed for relatives or friends coming from far away. Of course, the songs sometimes exaggerate how people in Rwanda felt about such a return. The famous song *Intsinzi* (Song M) asserts that after the attack on Byumba, “spirits are at the highest among all Rwandans.” This reflected again the ideal of the RPF embodying the common good and served a propaganda function in its own ranks. It was, however, wishful thinking at the time. The terror the RPF inspired made peasants flee en masse the otherwise small RPF “liberated zone” (Prunier 1998:175; Mamdani 2001: 186-189).

In addition, the RPF gives guarantees of its benevolence and that it will not exact revenge. In Song E, the Inkotanyi declare that 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”.

A rebellion in the continuity of Rwandan traditional fighters

While the songs celebrate, unsurprisingly, the RPF's military feats, this is done mainly through the language of traditions. The goal is twofold. First, it mobilises RPF members and supporters by tapping into the imagined ideal of pre-colonial Rwanda. As explained by Rusagara (2009: 174-175), "the narrativisation of the past glory of Rwanda was passed around [in the RPF] in order to create a sense of belonging to a community and history that transcended the experience of conflict." Second, it emphasises the unquestionable Rwandan character of the *Inkotanyi* by making them the heirs to a tradition of great fighters. Soldiers from the pre-colonial period are indeed key figures in the imaginary of Rwandans given the importance of warfare in Rwandan culture and society. This starts with the name *Inkotanyi*, which refers to a military formation in pre-colonial Rwanda under King Yuhi IV (Kagame 1963: 78).

The songs inscribe the RPF in the great Rwandan military legend first by multiplying references to traditional practices of warfare. In Song H, for instance, the decision to attack in 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

The song refers here to the traditional practice of "setting challenges" or *imihigo*, i.e. when fighters in the pre-colonial period would publicly pledge to reach ambitious military objectives, competing with one another. The link with military traditions is also made by using an epic style, and portraying the RPF war as if it was fought in pre-colonial times. Song G, about the October 1st 1990 invasion, tells this story:

Let me tell you the dream I had
I think my dream came true
I dreamt that we crossed the Umuyanja River [between Uganda and Rwanda]
With my bow on my shoulder
My arrows
My shield and spears
With cries announcing the attack [...]

In Song I:

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

Here the description of the RPF struggle is epic and heroic. The hero (Fred Rwigema) embodies the figure of the traditional hero. In Song T: Rwigema is presented as the incarnation of Rwanda's timeless nation by designating him as "the one that is leading the Inyambo", the royal cows in pre-colonial Rwanda. Warfare is often depicted in traditional terms, especially when talking about weapons.

Here there is no celebration of guns and rifles; the traditional spears, arrows and bows are their metaphors⁹. Song G calls the RPF fighters “intwaramiheto”, literally the “those who carry bows.” The reference to traditional warfare is also visible through the role afforded women in the songs. Song D for instance exhorts the listener to support “young men and young women on the battlefield.” For the RPF, as in traditional Rwandan culture, the war is not only men’s business. Rusagara describes how traditionally “all able-bodied men and women participated in one way or another” either as fighters or “busy providing the required logistics and support” (2009: xv).

Overall, through reference to traditional practices of warfare, the RPF asserts its full Rwandan character, the legitimacy of its fight for the refugees’ return, and implicitly celebrates an idealised Rwandan epic past of great feats.

Enemy

How the songs portray the enemy of the RPF is also instructive regarding the RPF’s ideology. While works exist on the Habyarimana regime and Hutu extremists’ vision of their enemy, notably through songs (Chrétien 1995; Des Forges 2007; Kimani 2007), the same is not true for the other side.

The contrast between how each side portrays the other is stark. Whereas the Hutu extremists systematically degraded and dehumanised the RPF, and the Tutsi who were viewed as their natural supporters (Chrétien 1995), the RPF and their followers did not resort to similar methods. First, a distinction is made between Habyarimana and his entourage, and the wider (and de facto mainly Hutu) population. The blame in songs hardly falls on the population, although the anti-Tutsi popular pogroms of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s are the cause of the Rwandan refugees’ plight, against which the RPF was the most recent reaction. Other pogroms occurred in the early 1990s as the result of the RPF attack. Nonetheless, the population is portrayed as oppressed by the regime or manipulated by it. The real enemy is Habyarimana and his *akazu*. Yet, even while attacking them, the songs never resort to the same derogatory and degrading language as the opposing side. The enemy is never blamed for who he is, only for what he does: sowing divisions and corrupting the country.

Song F clearly distinguishes between Habyarimana and the wider population and only blames the former, making the population its victim:

Tell me Habyarimana, I find you already discouraged
While we are just beginning, soon we will be in Kigali,
The Rwanda of Rwandans that you debase
We, the intrepid Inkotanyi, will cure it

Song O goes further, portraying the RPF as the saviour of a population “massacred” by the Habyarimana regime. In Song P, it is only Habyarimana who is blamed for the suffering in exile:

9. An exception to this 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...). But 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 “of petty thugs” [ingegera], what the list of RPF modern weapons in the songs aims to contradict.

Your [Habyrimana's] malice is beyond comprehension,
 When we fled, that was not enough for you
 You paid money, for us to be decimated in exile
 Our Creator saved us,
 Up to today, we are still alive

It is interesting to consider songs composed during or shortly after the genocide, when the extent of the genocide became known, to see how they deal with the issue of blame. Songs J and S, both composed in 1994, are logically the closest to blame not only Habyarimana and his entourage but wider sections of the population that supported his regime. Nevertheless, the tone is never vindictive, violent or degrading. It is only sad and frustrated at the blindness of the followers of the Habyarimana regime and the extent of the suffering they created. Song S, the only song that describes graphically the violence the RPF encountered, designates the enemy in a non-specific manner, only using the pronoun "they": "They decimated us [...] 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 recognised as such only through its horrible deeds.

Song J states:

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

We tried everything, you just did not want to hear
 Even the short lull granted by the Belgians
 We see today what you made of it

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

Overall, while songs evoke warfare as a tool against the enemy, they do not reveal the same fascination for violence that the Hutu power demonstrated at the same time (Chrétien 1995). Violence is presented as the regrettable consequence of the obstinacy of the Habyarimana regime. The language of violence is often subdued, indirect, coated in an epic and heroic language. Depiction of the enemy operates through a great deal of restraint. The restraint is first in scope. The enemy is not the (mainly Hutu) Rwandan population but Habyarimana, his cronies and foreign patrons. Restraint is also linguistic. Lyrics does not feature hatred of the enemy. Here there is no use of "animalisation, vulgarity, scatology" or "pornography" (Chrétien 1995: 376) to which the Hutu Power regularly resorted in its media to portray the RPF, its supporters and more generally the Tutsi.

Anti-imperialism

The liberation songs also reveal a deeply anti-imperialist ideology. The misfortune of Rwanda, and Africa more broadly, are presented ultimately as an evil brought by foreigners. This anti-imperialism is paralleled by both a pan-Africanist and nationalist ideology. 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, and worth quoting extensively¹⁰ :

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
Mandela disapproved of them, denounced them and kept them at a distance
Rwagasore disapproved of them, denounced them and kept them at a distance
Nyerere disapproved of them, denounced them and kept them at a distance
Once in Rwanda, they took the ruler and threw him behind the forest¹¹ , 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, denounced them and kept them at a distance
Mandela disapproved of them, denounced them and kept them at a distance
Rukeba disapproved of them, denounced them and kept them at a distance
Samora disapproved of them, denounced them and kept them at a distance
Kabarega disapproved of them, denounced them and kept them at a distance
Once in Rwanda, they took the ruler and threw him behind the forest, they made him the laughing stock of foreigners⁵. 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.

10. They feature translated in French in Chrétien (1995) and have been retranslated from Kinyarwanda for the article.

11. 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.

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

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 Inkotanyi entered Rwanda

The lies cannot find space to spread anymore, truth prevails in Rwanda, Habyarimana is vanquished.

Rwandan past figures are here used to show the historical resistance to the colonisers. The song implicitly links the foreigners backing Habyarimana (France and Belgium) to imperialists in the fifth stanza, and the *inkotanyi* to those who historically fought the colonisers. It is important to give a quick bibliographical background of the historical figures mentioned as they have crucial ideological purchase:

- King Yuhi Musinga (1896-1931) consolidated the Rwandan Kingdom after the period of expansion under his father while trying to preserve its power against the whites, as it is during his reign that Rwanda encountered the colonial rule.
- Muhumuza (died in 1945) was a prophetess in the north of the kingdom who claimed to be the queen of Kigeli IV Rwabugiri (who died in 1896). She resisted the colonisers but also the attempts of the court to control the Hutu northern kingdoms. Her power partly resided in the fact that she claimed to incarnate the Nyabingi divinity (Desforges 2011: 103). She was eventually captured by the British in 1911 (ibid. 120). Nyabingi continued after her death to be a rallying figure for resistance movements against colonisers in northern Rwanda from 1912 until 1918. Her cult was subsequently forbidden (Longman 2009: 37).
- Basebya was a Twa who led a revolt against taxation in 1905 in Northern Rwanda. He was tracked by the German and eventually captured in 1912 (Botte 1985a: 87 & 1985b: 295).
- Bisangwa was a traditional chief and a force commander sent by the King Kigeli IV Rwabugiri to fight the Germans south of Lake Kivu in 1896 (Chrétien 1995: 358).
- François Rukeba was a Hutu who was selected to be the founder and president of the monarchist, Tutsi-dominated nationalist and anti-colonialist UNAR party in 1959 (Linden 1977: 263).
- Mutara III Rudahigwa was king between 1931 and 1959. Docile instrument of the colonisers at the beginning of his reign, he supported the modernisation of Rwanda and eventually demanded national independence. He died in Bujumbura in 1959 while meeting with the colonial authorities, who are suspected to have killed him.

The choice of Rwandan heroes in the song is eclectic. It is likely to appeal across the regional and ethnic divides, reinforcing the picture of the RPF as an inclusive movement. While some as Bisangwa, Musinga and Mutara are heroes linked to the Tutsi monarchy, others such as the prophetess Muhumuza and the Twa rebel Basebya are linked to the history of resistance of the northern Hutu kingdoms to their assimilation in the Rwandan colonised kingdom. Rukeba, the most recent figure of the list, is a figure of synthesis: he was a Hutu and founding member of the Tutsi-dominated, pro-monarchy and nationalist UNAR party in 1959.

Interestingly, as remarked by Chrétien (1995: 358), some figures were also used at the same time by the opposing side for its anti-Tutsi propaganda. For instance, the famous extremist singer Bikindi, leader of the group *Irindiro*, whose songs were regularly played on the national radio and subsequently on the Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines (RTL), used the figure of Basebya in his song, “Sons of the Father of the Cultivators”.

Bikindi's aim, according to Chrétien, was to "illustrate the pathetic saga of a centuries-long repression of 'Hutu kinglets' by the Tutsis, a theme dear to the Parmehutu propaganda of 1958-1960, used again by the CDR [Hutu Power party] since 1992." (Chrétien 1995: 344)¹². This reveals how each side may use a common history differently to fit their respective ideological stances.

This Rwandan "hall of fame" in Song K is echoed by an African one, featuring the famous anti-colonial figures of Mandela, Nyerere, the Mozambican Samora Machel, the Burundian Rwagasore and Kabarega, the king of Bunyoro in Uganda, who resisted British efforts to make the kingdom a protectorate at the end of the 19th century.

Song L clearly conflates the current problems of Rwanda and of Rwandan refugees with the issue of colonisation, rendering 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
RPF, RPF we are coming home

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

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

¹². Translated from the French by the authors.

Several interesting features from the RPF anti-colonial ideology can be noted in these songs. First, the external world bears the blame for the fate of Rwanda. The harmony of the eternal Rwanda is disrupted by the arrival of the colonisers. They imposed their religion, and are invasive of Rwandan life as they banned traditional culture and even forced Rwandans “to confess their sins to them.” They asserted their power by inventing different origins for them and dividing the Rwandan people. This argument is extended over time to characterise the current situation, and over space, to the whole African continent, as Song K’s references to the Berlin Conference and the chorus between each verse (Africa you suffered...) remind the listener.

Second, the whites are also more directly blamed for the fate of the Rwandan refugees. In Song K, through Habyarimana, they spread hatred and keep some “natives” abroad. Song L even identifies a “plan of the whites” to keep the Rwandan refugees out of the country. The frustration regarding the role of the international community in the resolution of the refugee problem is also visible in Song H in an excerpt already mentioned. The decision of the RPF to attack in 1990 is explained by the realisation that “the never-ending UN way never succeeds”.

Third, Habyarimana is frequently blamed as the lackey of the whites, as a neo-colonial tool to maintain their power over the country. He is also regularly ridiculed for calling his white patrons whenever he is in jeopardy. Song F explains:

The armies of the Movement [Habyarimana’s 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
They came with heavy weapons
Many of them became food for the hawks

Song P is the most explicit in depicting Habyarimana as a neo-imperialist creation of the whites, directly addressing him:

On the first [of October 1990], bravely, we crossed the border,
When you saw us walking with determination
You rushed to call Zaire for help
Then France and Belgium
You asked the white people to rescue you

Similarly in song Q, after the RPF attack, “General Habyarimana quickly took the Impalla Caravelle plane/ that took him to Belgium [...] He said, “Help me to chase away all these little cockroaches, natural enemies of Rwanda”.

Westerners are also blamed for their misunderstanding of the refugees’ situation, as in Song H, which also derides the military support provided by Mobutu at the beginning of the war:

The whites took to their books
To try to understand this war,
Zairians took a risk, in vain
Let Mobutu recount their misfortune

This echoes Westerners' misunderstanding of Rwandan people in colonial times, which led colonisers for instance to "invent their origins", as expressed in Song L.

The impact of pre-genocide ideology on post-genocide policies

Overall, this analysis reveals a strong continuity between the ideology of the RPF as a rebel movement and its later ideology as a ruling party. All pre-genocide themes identified in the songs are still present in the RPF's current discourse: emphasis on unity, references to a mythical and idealised Rwanda, depicting the RPF as a professional and inclusive organisation fighting for the common good and destined to restore Rwanda to its once great status, and finally suspicion towards the external world. These ideological elements have in turn profoundly impacted the RPF's post-genocide policies.

Ideas about unity and about the Rwandan nation have significantly shaped recent RPF practices. For example, the much-critiqued ban on public reference to ethnicity emanates from the same understanding of unity that manifests in the songs. They conceptualised unity neither as mere stability (as in the Kayibanda and Habyarimana eras), nor as equality between ethnic groups, but as the irrelevance of ethnic categories. Consequently, the analysis that such idea of unity "served above all to hide ethnocracy" (Reyntjens 2016: 75) seems reductive. The idea of a post-ethnic society was articulated long before the RPF gained power and reflects a genuine ideal rather than only a strategy to conceal Tutsi domination. This is further supported if one keeps in mind that these songs, which promoted a post-ethnic unity above all else, were used first and foremost to mobilise and recruit Tutsi fighters.

The inclusive ideology of the RPF and its need to guarantee its benevolence were also visible after the genocide. The most conspicuous manifestations were for example the efforts to include the opposition in the government of national unity and formally stick to the Arusha accords, albeit in an adapted form. While indeed the RPF concentrated power in its hands, true to its ideas of unity and inclusivity, it was careful not to exclude other political groups. Indeed, when it became a ruling party, it "chose not to press home all of its advantages. It was not 'winner-takes-all'. [...] Instead the RPF undertook several, important confidence-building measures designed to reassure Rwanda's Hutu majority" (McDoom 2011: 11).

The idealisation of a supposed eternal Rwanda has also ramifications for current policies. The RPF nationalism relies on an interpretation of the world in highly historicised and mythologised terms (see also Reyntjens 2016). The ordeal of Rwanda, this land of immanent unity, beauty and harmony, is understood as an accident of history that the RPF aims to overcome. The RPF struggle becomes an attempt to end Rwanda's century of shame when the eternal Rwandan values had been profaned by colonial powers and subsequently by Kayibanda's and Habyarimana's neo-colonial regimes. Reviving Rwandan values appears as the antidote to the country's fate, to redress an aberration of history.

Yet the ideology is not reactionary. The values extolled are pride in Rwanda's pre-colonial history, but the RPF stays clear of conservatism, eschewing references to the pre-colonial political order and especially the monarchy. Overall, this helps to understand the peculiar mix in post-genocide Rwanda of high modernism with the extolling of Rwanda's pre-colonial practices. This is epitomised by the myriad of neo-traditional policies, the so-called "home-grown" solutions, proudly put forward by the government. The Rwandan Governance Board (RGB) has recently been put in charge of documenting and promoting them. This includes the *gacaca* courts, the *girinka* livestock distribution programme, the *itorero* civic education camps, the *ubudehe* social protection programme, the *Umushyikirano* national dialogue, the *abunzi* mediation committees and the *agaciro* sovereign fund. One of the most famous is the *imihigo*, the government performance contracts. *Imihigo* refer to the pre-colonial practice of fighters competing with one another in publicly pledging to reach ambitious military objectives. This was encountered, for example, in Song H, when referring to the decision of the RPF to attack in October 1990. It is revealing that *imihigo* for local government officials, supposedly tapping into Rwandan traditions to increased local officials' accountability, reflect typical "result frameworks" used by countless donors for project evaluation. This demonstrates that the function of such "homegrown solutions" is as much about solving problems as activating the ideology of a Rwandan idealised past. And indeed, as put by RGB, "homegrown solutions" are all "part of efforts to reconstruct Rwanda and nurture a shared national identity"¹³.

Ideas related to the RPF's vision of itself and of its enemy are also consequential in post-genocide governance. In the songs analysed here, the RPF considers itself the descendant of Rwanda's mythical fighters. It has a manifest destiny: give the country "back her title of Rwanda" as expressed in Song B. Such ideas help to better make sense of the "high modernist" or "social engineering" drive that is the hallmark of Rwandan post-genocide governance (Ansoms 2009, Hasselklog 2015, Reyntjens 2016). Characterised by a fast-paced, top-down, at times coercive, development, it is the powerful tool to transform Rwanda and give her back her greatness. This vision of the RPF restoring Rwanda's dignity also helps to understand the "moral authority and paternalism" (Hasselklog 2015: 163) of officials who "know better" (Reyntjens 2016: 69) when implementing the government's developmental project. High modernist policies are also linked to the sense of vulnerability that, early on, the RPF harboured. The RPF fought and took power in a context of scarce legitimacy, based on its dominant ethnic composition and its depiction by the enemy as an uneducated, thuggish group, to which ideas about the RPF inclusivity, expertise and commitment to change responded. These ideas profoundly shaped post-genocide policies. Chemouni (2017) has shown that the unusual success of public sector reforms in Rwanda was precisely driven by the RPF's internally perceived lack of legitimacy. Reforming the state along Weberian lines and curbing corruption was a way for the RPF to demonstrate its impartiality and inclusivity in ruling Rwanda, and its capacity to deliver development for all citizens.

Finally, current policies in Rwanda bear the hallmarks of the RPF's original anti-imperialism. Colonial powers and their Rwandan neo-colonial puppets (Kayibanda and Habyarimana) are responsible for Rwanda's "fall from Heaven" and its exploitation. This worldview helps to better make sense of the RPF "regime's assertive, at times arrogant stance and their often fraught relations with the world" (Reyntjens 2016: 69), as often perceived by diplomats, donors and scholars. The inaction of the world during the genocide only subsequently reinforced the RPF's view of the unreliability of foreign countries and the "never-ending UN way [that] never succeeds" as stated in Song H.

13. <http://www.rgb.rw/index.php?id=36> (accessed 31/07/2017)

This ideology of suspicion towards external, and especially Western, actors has had several practical consequences. First, it sheds light on “the ability of the RPF to exert considerable agency in the donor relationship” (Curtis 2015: 1373). Despite its high dependence on aid, the government has regularly opposed donors’ preferences when it did not fit their own. Rwanda’s flagship policy of Community Based Health Insurance (CBHI), otherwise known as *mutuelles de santé*, is a case in point. The government systematically resisted donors who promoted the principle either of free healthcare or questioned the compulsory insurance enrolment (Chemouni 2016). It did not hesitate to ask non-compliant NGOs to stop their operations (*ibid.*). Such assertiveness in the relationship with foreigners is compounded by the idea that foreigners do not necessarily understand Rwanda’s reality. While this Rwandan exceptionalism has been linked with the experience of the genocide (Beswick 2011: 99; Reyntjens 2016: 70), the songs analysed here show that this view has older origins. It originates in the exceptionalism of Rwanda’s culture and past, and in the misunderstanding of Rwandan refugees’ ordeal. Song B for example decries “the whites [who] took to their books to try to understand this war.”

Second, suspicion towards external actors helps to better appreciate the emphasis put on self-reliance in the RPF’s post-genocide discourse and policies. The ideology of the RPF makes aid a double-edged sword, useful for restoring the country’s greatness but also a potential conduit for neo-colonial domination. It is thus unsurprising that reducing aid dependency receives much greater importance in Rwanda than in many other African countries. It is for instance an explicit goal of Rwanda’s Vision 2020 (written in 2000). In 2012, the creation of the *agaciro* [dignity] sovereign fund following threats of aid cuts was framed “as a common goal against external threats (Western donors), which was perceived to be attacking Rwanda’s sovereignty” (Behuria 2016: 442). Guarding against foreign actors’ interference requires self-reliance at the national but also at the individual level. For the RPF, this has taken the form of a paternalistic social engineering project, mentioned above, of “changing mind-sets” so that people become actors of development, not passive recipients of aid, as observed for example in policies in education (Honeyman 2016), agriculture (Ansoms 2009) or health (Chemouni 2016).

Overall, while no significant modification of the RPF ideology in the pre-genocide period occurred, new themes emerged after 1994. The theme of self-reliance does not feature as such in the songs. Reyntjens (2016) argues that the idea of a Rwandan exceptionalism was articulated later because it has been linked with the experience of the genocide. Most strikingly perhaps, the issue of development, so pivotal in the RPF post-genocide narrative, is not prominent in the songs. Yet, this paper reveals that all of these later themes did not come *ex-nihilo* but rather drew heavily on an pre-existing worldview. The emphasis on self-reliance can be traced back to the RPF’s overarching suspicion towards the external world. The idea of exceptionalism already permeates the songs, through the celebration of an idealised Rwanda that bears no comparison to other countries, and through the idea that outsiders simply do not understand Rwanda’s problems. The current ideology of top-down, fast-paced development also draws on a multiplicity of pre-genocide ideological sources: an idealisation of Rwanda; the divine mission of the RPF to restore the dignity of the country; and, the RPF’s vision of itself as an organisation that must convince Rwandans and the world of its inclusive and expert character.

Conclusion

Liberation songs help to understand how, before reaching power, the RPF made sense of its environment and the issues it faced, how it envisioned the proper order of society, and how such order was to be achieved. The songs show that the RPF articulated early on a coherent ideology that has endured over time and continues to shape its current policies. Overall, the analysis here questions the commonly held view of the RPF as an organisation using ideas simply as tools of manipulation and domination (cf. Pottier 2002, Reyntjens 2016, Behuria 2016). First, the high degree of continuity between the ideas of the RPF as a rebel movement and those of the RPF as a ruling party nuances the overly “realpolitik” view of the Front’s ideology in the post-genocide era. Even ideas that emerged once the RPF began to rule Rwanda were in many ways a logical consequence of pre-1994 ideas when victory was still elusive. Second, the primary audience of the songs was not foreigners, donors, NGOs or even the Rwandan population. They were mainly RPF supporters and sympathisers. Songs were composed by them and for them. Their function was to diffuse an ideology within the movement and they can therefore hardly be considered primarily as a manipulative tool against an external audience.

The paper consequently invites us to consider the RPF as a political organisation in which ideology plays a critical role as a motivation for action. While its ideas may well have served the organisation’s interests, they are also a mental model through which these interests were identified and articulated. Our analysis can therefore be located within the “ideational turn” (Blyth 1997) in politics that has reaffirmed the role of ideas in political processes and criticised approaches based solely on self-evident “objective” incentives (Blyth 2003, Béland and Cox 2011). Analysing the RPF’s ideology as only a tool of power, or resulting solely from a structure of incentives, risks greatly under-explaining the Rwandan post-genocide reality.

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