

Rwanda, Today

BY DAVID RUDENSTINE

"YES," I SAID WHEN SHERI ROSENBERG, the director of our Program in Holocaust and Human Rights Studies, suggested that we have a human rights program in Rwanda as part of our inaugural January 2008 overseas semester. And then, just as quickly, I said I wanted to take part, too.

Return

It wasn't really Rwanda that captivated me. Neither before nor after the 1994 genocide, during which perhaps one million people were killed, had I really been interested in visiting the tiny country that is the home of mountain gorillas and surrounded by the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Uganda, Tanzania, and Burundi. Rwanda did not boast of indigenous wood carving, weaving, transformative music, inspired poets, or celebrated novelists. It lacked the mystique of Ethiopia's ancient culture, the allure of Zanzibar, the romance of the Serengeti, the beauty of Kenya's Indian Ocean coast, and the mystery of the Sudanese Nile. Nor had it been on the cutting edge of

the political revolution that turned African colonies into independent states in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

Rather, what stirred me was the possibility of returning to the eastern, lake-filled region of Africa where I had been a Peace Corps volunteer for two years in the mid-1960s. I was surprised at how quickly I reexperienced the high hopes that many of my generation had in the early 1960s, when political and social change swept through both Africa and the United States. After a century of European rule, Africa was experiencing a political revolution as independent states rapidly replaced colonialism. Simultaneously, the American civil rights movement was jump-started by the 1954 Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* and transformed by the Freedom Riders and lunch counter sit-ins. As in the US, the African independence movement was led by a handful of individuals who seemed larger than life—people such as Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, Jomo Kenyatta of Kenya, and Julius Nyerere of Tanganyika (later Tanzania).

The coming together of these powerful political events on two continents felt like the dawn of a new era



that promised equality to Americans and self-determination to Africans. It was a moment that suggested past oppressions and inequalities were being confronted and addressed. Of course, we now know that things did not turn out as my youthful and inexperienced generation had hoped.

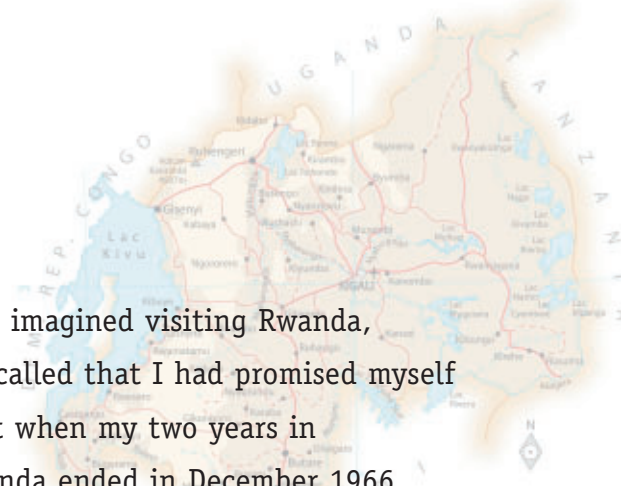
As I imagined visiting Rwanda, I recalled that when my two years in Uganda ended in December 1966, I had promised myself I would return, and return often. I never did, not once. Career and family dominated my subsequent life, and my travel and professional interests led me elsewhere. It was only as I began to catch up on the discouraging and depressing details of sub-Saharan African history during the past 50 years that I realized that the African experience since the 1960s—the dictators, wars, corruption, famine, and diseases—had smothered my eagerness to return.

In retrospect I also realized that I had caught a glimpse of sub-Saharan Africa's future while observing events in Uganda. When I landed on the north shore of Lake Victoria's Entebbe airport in January 1965, optimism prevailed. Uganda exported coffee, cotton, and tea and it seemed politically stable, encompassing the large, ancient kingdom of Buganda in the south and the Nilotic and Sudanic groups in the north. It was also part of an ambitious East African federation with a promising university.

But soon I heard reports about Prime Minister Milton Obote's secretive and autocratic governing style; his desire for a one-party state; his intolerance of political opposition; and the rise of political corruption, evidenced by top government officials living in the "big house" and being driven around hilly Kampala in their Mercedes-Benzes. And then early in 1966, everything fell apart politically. In February 1966, Obote's police imprisoned cabinet ministers, disbanded the National Assembly, suspended the constitution, assumed all governmental powers, and within a short time, as I remember it, ringed the new parliament with soldiers and made it clear that the members should not come out until they had approved a new constitution, giving Obote enormous power. Indeed, on April 15 a new constitution was published, and on its first page the following unapologetic announcement of autocratic rule appears: "WHEREAS in the interests of national stability, public security and tranquility the Prime Minister on the twenty-second day of February, 1966, suspended the then Constitution of Uganda and took over all the powers of Government as a temporary measure..." As would happen in many other African states, Uganda's short-lived experiment with democratic rule abruptly ended, and within a few years, Idi Amin overthrew Obote and ushered in a reign of terror and mass atrocities.

Rebirth

In Rwanda, I joined Sheri Rosenberg, Amy Sugin, the director of our international programs, and 16 students for about two weeks in Kigali, Rwanda, and Arusha, Tanzania, where



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the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) is located. During that time, we met with the Rwandan minister of justice, the minister for internal security, the assistant US ambassador, the political advisor to the US ambassador, and various representatives of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). In addition we observed a traditional gacaca judicial proceeding and took a tour of the main national prison, in which one third of the 3,000 male prisoners were locked up for genocide-related crimes. Our students spent a day at an orphanage and the better part of another visiting with Rwandan law students. We visited the ICTR and met with the chief judge, chief prosecutor, assistant prosecutors, and defense lawyers.

Modern Rwanda is nothing short of amazing. Fourteen years ago, thousands of Hutus using machetes and other handheld weapons killed some one million Tutsis and Hutu sympathizers within a hundred days. The slaughter ended only when the Tutsi-led Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), a military force long based in Uganda that invaded Rwanda in 1990, finally drove the Hutu military out of the country and captured Kigali, Rwanda's capital. By that time, war and genocide had hollowed out the country, a condition reflected by the hundreds of dogs roaming Kigali streets eating the bodies of the dead. Today Kigali is clean and orderly, and functions at a high level. Even an experience as simple as driving from the airport into central Kigali is noteworthy. The roads are paved, there are no oppressive shantytowns in sight, new buildings dot the roadside, traffic is orderly, and the streets are clean. Moreover, Kigali and the towns I visited all seemed safe, and there is obvious confidence among government officials about security. I did not hear reports of government corruption, and if the infamous sign of government self-indulgence is a driver and a Mercedes-Benz, I did not see it in Kigali.

There is a deep conviction among many that the current national leadership is committed and sufficiently talented to make the country economically stronger and more viable in the long term. According to Stephen Kinzer, whose *A*

Thousand Hills: Rwanda's Rebirth and the Man Who Dreamed It was recently published and who spent more than 30 hours interviewing Rwanda's president, Paul Kagame, the president wants Rwanda to achieve by 2020 what the "Asian tigers"—South Korea, China, Taiwan, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand—achieved in the second half of the twentieth century. He wants to pull the nation "from poverty to prosperity in the space of a generation."

Kagame is no unanchored dreamer; he is making good on his ambitions for Rwanda. Richard Orth, a military attaché at the American embassy in the mid-1990s, returned to Kigali after eight years and was "astounded" at the changes he observed. "Not surprised, but astounded," he emphasized to Kinzer. "It was everything from seeing the police force acting like real police, driving patrol cars and using traffic tickets, to the banking reforms that have turned that city into the Zurich of Central Africa. All of this stems from Kagame and his vision."

Identity

But as our group visited with more Rwandan government officials, US officials, and NGOs, and as we had more conversations with Rwandans, a complex and problematic set of interrelated themes emerged.

On the mind of everyone who visits Rwanda are several questions: how are the Tutsi and Hutu defined, and what are their differences? And what caused the Hutus to slaughter the Tutsis and their Hutu sympathizers in 1994?

The stereotypes of the Tutsi and Hutu are well known. Tutsis are said to be tall, lean, and elegant, with thin lips and aquiline noses; they may be Hamitic in origin and may have traveled to Rwanda from the north, perhaps Ethiopia, centuries ago. In contrast, Hutus are said to be indigenous, short, and stocky, with flat noses and larger lips. But no one I met in Rwanda accepts that these stereotypes can be relied upon for identification. Some question whether the stereotypes were ever valid; others say that intermarriage has blended the ethnic groups. And more than one person used himself or herself to illustrate how invalid the stereotypes are. One person with whom I spent many hours pointed out that she had all the features of a Hutu but was, in fact, Tutsi. The two groups also share a language, food, religion, family structure, and a culture. There is only one factor that suggests a difference, even if its significance is diminishing. Historically, the Tutsi were cattle herders; the Hutus were farmers, and sometime along the way, being a herder became more prestigious than being a farmer.

In an effort to eradicate ethnic identities that might result in prejudice, acts of discrimination, and ethnic violence, the government forbids the classification of people into Tutsis or Hutus and insists that everyone identify himself or herself as Rwandan. Nonetheless, traditional identifications continue to be powerful in contemporary Rwanda. During my short stay in Kigali, there were news reports of what govern-

ment officials termed student-initiated "genocidal ideology" in the public schools that led to disciplinary action against teachers and school principals for failing to take adequate corrective action. The government is going to need a more meaningful and influential strategy than it is currently employing if it is to mold a citizenry with a national identity in which political majorities are formed without considering traditional ethnic identity.

A statement addressing the complex history and causes of the 1994 genocide is well beyond the scope of this essay, but what government officials with whom we met said about Rwandan history is indicative of the challenges the country must meet as it seeks to establish a lasting, stable peace. Government officials emphasize three historical themes as they discuss the 1994 genocide. When the Belgians turned the Tutsis into instruments of colonial rule in the early twentieth century, they created an atmosphere that bred ethnic hatred among historically compatible ethnic groups, resulting in oppression and violence. Second, the failure to hold Hutus accountable for the genocidal killing of Tutsis as early as 1959 convinced the Hutus they could commit atrocities with impunity. Third, there are no connections among the invasion of Rwanda in 1990 by the Tutsi-led Rwandan Patriotic Front, the resulting four-year civil war, the impending Tutsi defeat of Hutu forces, and the 1994 genocide.

This stilted historical perspective is at odds with the views of many who have studied and written about the 1994 catastrophe, as well as with how Hutus explain what happened. The result is a struggle over the country's historical narrative that is so intense, active, and important that history is not now taught in Rwandan schools. This debate over history is no mere academic matter; indeed the stakes are high as both the Tutsis and Hutus seek moral exculpation through a historical narrative. At the risk of oversimplifying, it may be said that Tutsis wish for a historical narrative that characterizes them as victims of Hutu genocide and relieves

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them of responsibility for the violence that has plagued Rwanda for 50 years, while Hutus favor a narrative that casts them as victims of Tutsi oppression and frames their violent acts as self-defense against aggressive Tutsi forces.

The resolution of this debate will require that both Tutsis and Hutus come to terms with their own morally complicated and compromised history, and accept that each is the victim of the other's violence. Such an acceptance will not immediately dissipate the distrust and hostility that now characterize their relationship, but it may be a prelude to more-trusting relations, and the emergence of one Rwandan national identity.

Accountability

Anyone visiting Rwanda asks what is required for the Tutsis and the Hutus to be reconciled and live in peace. The answer given by one government official after another was unexpected. Instead of emphasizing truth-telling and forgiveness by means of a "Truth and Reconciliation" commission modeled on the South African experience, they insisted that a major cause of the 1994 genocide was the failure of previous governments to hold the Hutus accountable for past atrocities and acts of genocide that commenced in the 1950s. According to this logic, Hutus accused of being "perpetrators" and participating as "foot soldiers" in the genocide organized and directed by Hutu leaders must be tried, and imprisoned if convicted. Once the premise of this position is granted, a program to prosecute suspected Hutus takes on compelling force.

But at that point matters become complicated, because there are fewer than 300 lawyers in all of Rwanda. As a result, it is not possible for the government to try the hundreds of thousands of accused Hutus in accord with Western judicial standards. The government has instead resurrected the traditional *gacaca* courts to adjudicate the cases of the accused Hutus. In this process, parties are not represented by lawyers; the judges are not lawyers and have minimal training; there are no rules of evidence or criminal procedure; and a witness's testimony is not organized by direct testimony or cross-examination. As a result, the likelihood of convicting the innocent is high.

Government officials respond to questions pressing this point in two ways. The first, and most direct, is to accept injustice and prison overcrowding as the price of accountability. From their perspective, this is a straightforward utilitarian equation in which accountability trumps fairness, even as they recognize that a by-product of convicting the innocent is to aggravate further Hutu hostility toward the Tutsis. The second—and this is more implied than explicit—is to undercut the risk of convicting the so-called innocent by suggesting that Hutus who opposed the killing of Tutsis in 1994 either were killed themselves or fled, and that those Hutus who were adults in 1994 and remained in Rwanda during the slaughter bear some responsibility for the genocide.

Because of their emphasis on accountability, Rwandan officials are sensitive to the claim that accountability—especially one-sided accountability that leaves Tutsis immune from prosecution—will deter reconciliation. Denying the inevitability of this dynamic, they tell stories of how the process of reconciliation is advanced, one victim and one perpetrator at a time. The most riveting story I heard involved a Tutsi woman whose Hutu husband and children were killed during the genocide. After some years, the woman visited the imprisoned man responsible for the murders, who fell to his knees and begged her forgiveness. In time, the woman forgave the Hutu assailant, and then married him.

These government officials reject any suggestion that evenhanded justice and a lasting, stable peace in Rwanda require that the government hold Tutsis, the leadership of the RPF, and their militia supporters responsible for war crimes and atrocities committed during the 1990–94 civil war or afterward. My impression from our meetings is that these officials simply refuse to accept any causal link between the 1994 genocide and the civil war, and, therefore, they reject the idea that charges should be brought against President Kagame and his supporters for any wartime acts committed by them or pursuant to their directives that resulted in the restoration of Tutsi authority.

Democracy

In addition to the fundamental issues involving ethnic identity and reconciliation, it was clear that political freedoms in contemporary Rwanda are sharply curtailed. The major building blocks essential for the emergence of democratic processes—political parties, a vigorous free press, dynamic political dissent, transparency, and accountability—are not in evidence in Rwanda.

The most dramatic expression of the absence of dynamic political freedom is President Kagame's 2003 election victory, in which he won 95 percent of the vote even though Hutus make up about 85 percent of the population. Stephen Kinzer sheds light on the lopsided outcome by explaining that the political atmosphere during the months and weeks prior to the election discouraged challenges. The former president, Pasteur Bizimungu, was in jail. Some former cabinet ministers who might have mounted a formidable campaign "were living outside Rwanda and afraid to return." When a challenger, Faustin Twagiramungu, did announce his candidacy, the parliament banned his political party, the press gave his campaign "little coverage," his supporters were intimidated and harassed, and "[s]everal of them...disappeared and were never seen again." I heard no one argue that the political climate had become freer since the 2003 election.

Other signs of serious political repression in Rwanda were visible during my stay. Many people who spoke to our group wanted to know in advance who would be present

because, as more than one of them said, “What I say will depend on who is there.” We met lawyers in Arusha defending Hutu clients before the ICTR who believe they are being followed and their calls monitored as they track down evidence helpful to their clients. They also reported that many witnesses refuse to appear at the international proceedings because of intimidation. The media seemed quite restricted, even though we were told that freedom of the press was becoming stronger. I did not get the sense that there was any current meaningful political opposition to Kagame and his followers, nor that such opposition would be tolerated.

security and economic development over political freedom and democratic rule. How much latitude should be extended and for how long are profoundly important questions that must continually be addressed. But applying Western political standards and expectations to a country still emerging from a human catastrophe of enormous proportions in which another cycle of violence is not out of the question seems unrealistic.

At the same time, the Kagame government's failure to make political reform important and to take visible steps to build democratic processes—even if the steps are slowly taken—may well risk igniting a dynamic that destroys what Kagame says he is seeking to accomplish. In the end, the Tutsis and the Hutus will only be safe and free if they rise above their mutual distrust, create political majorities based on considerations other than traditional ethnic identities, and embrace democratic institutions that allow for the peaceful transfer of power.

The odds are against Rwanda maintaining peace, advancing economic development, and creating a political society that respects majority rule untethered to past ethnic identities. But if there is reason to hope that the Kagame government will prevail against profound economic and social forces and beat the odds, it is because leadership may make



Reports from international human rights groups validate my anecdotal impressions.

As important as political reform may be, the building of democratic processes does not seem to be a priority for Kagame. His government values security first and economic development second. As Kagame told Kinzer: “Rwanda cannot have the majority of its people living on less than one dollar a day. It is simply unacceptable. You cannot have progress or a future when most of your people are barely living.” Kagame’s government also equates the security of the Tutsi with Tutsis controlling the government, and, given that the Hutus are the overwhelming majority, the Kagame government places no emphasis on democratic reforms.

It is easy to criticize the political repression of the Kagame government. But Rwanda is complex and not easily knowable, and to a first-time visitor like me, the government seems entitled, especially in the face of a recent genocide that the international community did nothing to stop, to some latitude as it emphasizes—at least in the short term—

the difference. Martin Meredith wrote in his book *The Fate of Africa: A History of Fifty Years of Independence* that the internationally acclaimed novelist Chinua Achebe lamented in 1983 with regard to his homeland: “The trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership. There is nothing basically wrong with the Nigerian character. There is nothing wrong with the Nigerian land or climate or water or air or anything else. The Nigerian problem is the unwillingness or inability of its leaders to rise to the responsibility, to the challenge of personal example which are the hallmarks of true leadership.”

Perhaps the same can be said of Rwanda: political leadership may make a difference. If that is true, Kagame and the leaders of his government hold in their hands the possibility of turning the improbable into reality, and making a gift of peace, stability, and economic development to the Rwandan people. If that occurs, then developments in Rwanda might set an example for a continent that desperately needs a political and social success story. ■