

## **CHANGING RWANDAN VISION OF WOMEN AND LAND, IN THE HEART OF THE HOUSE, AT THE OUTSKIRTS OF THE WORLD**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The modest sketch I am quickly presenting here is the product of many years of reading about Rwandan culture and history, as well as of intensive fieldwork conducted on a remote hill between 1988 and 1990, a fieldwork which had prolongation until 1995 when I visited refugee camps in Kivu.

Because gender and ethnicity are constructed as ascribed identities, they are used, perhaps more than other socio-cultural identities, to determine ways of access to various types of resources. Stereotypes about genders and gender roles are often embedded in wider ideologies. These ideologies enshrine and mask games of power, and legitimate discriminations regarding access to community resources.

In contexts of peripheral economies, the cultural gauges of wealth can alter, while the justification of inequalities shifts more slowly. When the local political system, as was the case in Rwanda, encompasses religious rules giving ground to the reproduction of society, these changes in the sources and forms of wealth can dramatically modify the views about rules of distribution, and about the cultural value given to goods. The ideology of kingship can prevail well after the installment of a republic, but the religious conception of governance can hardly survive interactions on the global scene. The Rwandan case is an illustration of these cultural phenomena at a national level.

The switches in the ideological references do not, however, occur at an even pace in all fractions of society. They also come step by step, as a kaleidoscope retains pieces of the original image, and they are articulated and, so to speak, digested, in the process of social rituals. As economic and political factors modify both the resources and the paths giving access to wealth, there is a need for a new ideology legitimizing a shift from a paradigm of circulation within a religio-political whole, towards a paradigm of accumulation of knowledge, money and commodities by individuals breaking all frontiers. Christian ideologies help bridging the local ideological gap, especially when they are embodied in rituals that can easily be locally re-appropriated. Other social practices, and in particular rituals of conviviality revolving around exchanges of economic, social and symbolic significance (such as exchanges of beer and cows and weddings), can bridge this gap efficiently too. These practices are not limited to sectarian fractions of society or to restricted areas of life. They are, on the contrary, rooted in a constantly re-elaborated and reenacted worldview and can, therefore, make use of all the possible ambiguities of meaning to make the inequalities they portray acceptable. I shall come back to this in my paper.

Rwanda, a country in contact with *"the West"* for only a century, experienced a rapid, and late, economic growth during the years 1976-1987. This growth was mainly the result of foreign aid, and can hardly be seen as development. Everybody's expectations for improvement increased while, in fact, the socio-cultural inequalities got deeper. Some women could seize new opportunities, and build models of femininity rooted in the local, re-elaborated worldview. Others just inserted new items, such as a salary, or circumstances, such as life in the refugee camps, in the most traditional images of female roles. Others, yet, used opportunities to protest against the constraints of the patriarchal order. Following the paradigm of cultural creolization (Hannerz 1992), I shall envisage new women's roles as tokens of tradition versus modernity, as

Rwandan would have said. As anthropologists, we would rather speak about tokens of local values versus cosmopolitan ones.

## **THE OLD RWANDAN ORDER**

In Rwanda, the rituals of the sacred kingship were codified. Known by a dozen of specialists, these rituals epitomized a popular wisdom displayed in proverbs, narratives, and daily practices. The fertility of families, as well of the old kingdom, depended upon the ritual conformity of the king and his subjects. The continuation of the kingdom, and of the family lineages, was built upon the respect of gender roles reinforced by taboos and ritual obligations, murder of pregnant girls included. Women of the elite as well as the overexploited peasant women, shared in this views, and this made the ideology even more effective.

The Rwandan system of thought and code of practice can be summarized in the motto: conform to gender and hierarchy complementarity so that the cosmic and social order can perpetuate itself. The fundamental rule is expressed in religious prescriptions making an obligation of a correct circulation of forces within boundaries that were, in their turn, submitted to rules of closure and opening. The exchange of gifts materialized the circulation of forces. Leaving aside the small gifts of food, which build daily relations between neighbours, three spheres of exchange were of significance. Gifts of beer and gifts of cows created bonds between lineages. These bonds could culminate in the exchange of daughters. What women got for being given was the only possible social status of wife and mother. In exchange for her work, she would get a share in the usufruct of her husband's fields. These exchanges were still performed, with some changes conveying new meanings, on the eve of the genocide.

Supernatural forces were meant to circulate ritually between well-defined inner frontiers and external country limits, according to the ritual position of the king in charge, following a cycle about which I am not expanding here. The body of the wife, the family house and its enclosure, were subject to ritual rules in an analogy with those governing the kingdom. The rituals of sacred kingship separated the country in two complementary parts, just as the spouses were complementary in perpetuating the man's lineage, experiencing daily an unequal access to the ground and different modalities of circulation. Once married, women were bound to cultivate the fields of their husband, and restricted their movements to the necessities of the household and to a few visits to their parents. The supreme cultural value was fertility within an institutionalized

man-woman (or woman-men) relationship embedded in the webs of lineage relationships.

## **DISORDER WELL ON THE WAY**

During colonial time, and during the first republic, the old vision of the world could persist, and still provided the hill farmers (95%) with frames of interpretation very recently. It kept producing effects, as virtual constructions often do, would say Van Binsbergen. What matters to us here, is that the notion of a sacred country closed on itself only vanished with the installment of the second republic (1973). The rapid flow of cash the second president could attract was more effective in producing the changes than any previous political measure. The difference between the kingly powers of previous times, and those of the president were slowly becoming clear in the eyes of the country people. Money was, obviously, surpassing the old limits and the flow was regulated from outside. In a land where secrecy still was the order of the day, showing off became an aspect of cosmopolitanism. The shapes of the house had changed, as a token of progress in the context of an official program, and the enclosures had started to disappear, while more and more houses were built along the roads. The country was not only penetrated by a Western influence, but Eastern countries provided models, in this case, a positive connotation to openness.

While all women in the past had silently symbolized the heart of the house, some of them, in the modern context of their profession, could find a channel to speak. Many other changes had jeopardized the local worldview, overpopulation in the first place. For the poorer ones, children were not wealth anymore as workforce, as the land had become too scarce. Children had also ceased to be a social asset, as their respect for the local culture faded. The capital city, any activity related to a more cosmopolitan way of life, were the new poles of attraction for the young generation. Success in the modern spheres of life had become the token of belonging to THE society and the result was that the vast majority of the population was, and felt, disqualified.

I could briefly illustrate this by describing the typical arrangements rich people (country civil servants and merchants) would make when throwing parties, at the occasion of a betrothal or a wedding, or, possibly under any pretext when throwing a party was of political use (for more details, see de Lame 1995 or 1996a). The guests could be as many as almost a thousand. Enormous quantities of beer were distributed; both bottled and locally brewed. Less wealthy people

would emulate, as beer sharing is the local way to achieve and display social consent to the celebrated event. For the rich ones, the feast would only involve a very partial distribution of their wealth, for the majority, the expenses were important. During the event itself, the seats occupied, and the food and drinks the guests received were indicators of their respective social importance. Only the wealthier hosts could afford to give solid food prepared the European way to their guests of honor, and the bottled beer received or not drew another line amidst the participants. In their turn, however, all guests would come to the front to drink sorghum beer in the common clay gourd, and while doing so, show their agreement with the event celebrated and with the party itself. In this way, festivities had become the place to show off the ties with the powerful intermediaries giving access to money and cosmopolitan goods and, on the other hand, make the inequalities acceptable to an extent. Local tokens of conviviality had become instrumental in making changes accepted. This modern interpretation could go as far as to give seats of honor to female civil servants, but not to give them the power of solemn speech. Only when fulfilling modern functions had women the right to speak and use the power of the word.

All these changes were taking place in an economic nightmare: a situation described by the country population as apocalyptic. Many aspects of the disorders could find an appropriate interpretation within the old worldview. For the average peasant, the satisfaction of basic needs was at stake, with rampant famine, diseases of coffee trees, and AIDS haunting the hills. For the young generation, the frustration was even deeper because in the absence of employment, the scarcity of land made it meaningless to marry. The result was an increasing number of pregnancies for girls (30% before 18, in a country where they would have been put to death or exiled sixty years earlier) and the availability of young men for any enterprise which would provide them with means of protest and with new hopes. People in power, having granted the best positions for themselves and their children, felt threatened by the structural adjustment policy whose burden was indeed transferred onto the peasants shoulders (Marysse & Ndayambaje 1995). Western pressures towards democratization under the guise of multipartyism increased their fears of being ousted from their positions. The embittered and understandably ambitious young men formed a main striking force easy to mobilize. Indeed, they were mobilized under the slogans of restoring order.

*But, what about women?*

## **FIGURES OF PROTEST, AND BEARERS OF A NEW ORDER**

The infamous queen-mother Kanjogera, who bridged pre-colonial and colonial times of the Rwandan kingdom, conveying the court intrigues and the cruelties she could afford to order, has been referred to as the model for the wife of the late president. Both of them could hardly be seen as figures of liberation as far as gender roles are concerned. Both could be seen as the bearers of their father's lineage's flag. The late president's wife, however, can well have provided some female petty chiefs with a legitimization for their deeds.

There have been, in the past, few alternatives to the total dependency of women. Getting married and fertile was the only way to achieve adulthood. Being married involved a submission to the males of one's husband lineage. Easily repudiated women spent a short time back on the land of their father. They had to be married again, and became increasingly ready to accept circumstances they would have rejected when marrying for the first time. Getting older could push some women towards suicide if no male relative was willing to take them under his roofs.

The cult of Nyabingi offered an alternative to these prospects. Nyabingi, a female spirit praised as superior to any ancestors, had her believers in the Northern part of the country. The adepts could be girls or boys. Some of these girls lived in a kind of monastery under the guardianship of an old woman. For the girls who would, in this way, escape the lineage logic, becoming an adept of Nyabingi could pave the way towards positions of authority. Acting within a popular movement of rebellion, they would, however, question the oppressive social order rather than the male supremacy as such. The modern, imported version has known such a success that, emulating the Catholic convents, the Presbyterian Church, contrary to its tradition, created convents in Rwanda. Few of these were places of social protest but all could provide the women inside with the ease and prestige of a life relieved from work on the fields and from male supremacy, a life possibly dreamed as modernity.

Slowly, new ways to live within a more individualized marriage emerged under the influence of some, rather marginal Christian denominations. But these

remained exceptions. Earning a salary, as did women civil servants, is not, in itself, a guarantee for a more independent or respected life. Many salaried women, just as they would earn the living of the household by tilling the fields, would have to pay the workers who did it in their stead. On the other hand, an important proportion of the male salaries was spent in drinking. Contrary to what happens in many African countries, women could not be successful merchants in Rwanda. If they attempted to trade, they would have to accept the "protection" of a man, even if he might be, as in the case of some entrepreneurial widow, a dead husband (Jefremovas 1991). Country widows could be seen as figures of protest when they explicitly refused to remarry, but they too, were aware of being dependent on their sons for their future. Some of them maintained a position of power while allowing a man to take up his residence in their house, but in a subordinate position. This was an unstable situation too. Illegitimate mothers, living in a total contradiction with the old worldview, were also challenging, via their progeny, the patrilineal rights of access to land. They were, however, passive bearers of change.

Politics and religion seemed the two fields where there was room, for some women, to achieve positions of power. This is what also appears when reading the horrifying accounts of the genocide events. What is striking, is that the turmoil revealed existing positions more than it created new ones. While men and women were tortured and killed, men and women tortured and killed. One may wonder who were those women who induced others to kill, killed, or failed to protect. One thing is certain, and that is that some Rwandan women in a position of power exerted their power, for better or for worse, just as some men did. On this field, equality has been achieved. The writers of the African Rights report on women killers (1995) aim at avoiding impunity for women killers who hide behind the screen of a stereotyped female innocence. But they also give a hint of something else. The first massive participation of women in killings goes back to 1973, when some student girls played a role in denouncing Tutsi fellow students. The stakes of modernity seem to have been big enough to persuade women to play their role in protecting privileges, or grabbing crumbs of modernity when possible. Another hint of the modern stakes at play in the genocide is revealed in the role women and girls played in stripping the dead ones of any belonging. The fact that many women (and many more men yet) were victims should not make us forget the active role some other women played. Stereotypes making all women either victims or passive executioners could help providing impunity, which makes it impossible for the country to heal.

## THE END OF A WORLD

Colonization, a revolution and a coup were less effective in dismantling the local worldview than what amounts to a collective self-destruction led within the context of local interpretations of global relations. Even a year later, those who retreated from the advancing army still held their views unchanged about the country and its political system. In daily camp life, many of the older ways remained. Some women exploited others under the same guises as back in the country, and men made use of women just more explicitly than before, as they rejected any young companion when a pregnancy made her less productive and less attractive. It is well known that exile reinforces identities, and drives people to elaborate imaginary worlds, back there (Malkki 1995).

I shall not deal further with the Kivu refugees. Instead, I try to figure out what the current situation, as far as I know it, can have changed the condition of women, and could induce more changes in the future. In doing so, I brushed a sketch of what living in the Rwanda countryside can now be like. Kigali, the capital city, is less dependent on the products of the country than ever before. Rwanda is all but pacified, and a portion of the territory remains in a state of war.

This keeps the country within a situation of an ill-defined status, with all the disruptive connotations this involves. The normal process of mourning is impossible. Many deceased remain unfound, as do men who fled to Congo and were later disbanded. The women who returned in greater numbers than men joined the high numbers of widows and deserted wives already present. The high number of prisoners also testifies for the unsettled situation of the country. To be sure, the vision of a country united under, and incarnated in, a so to speak "*sacred*" leader, can hardly have survived the turmoil engendered by leaders who bluntly appeared as warlords with little concern for their people. This consideration, if placed into the local cultural context, has made obsolete the perception of the head of the state as a purveyor of fertility and wealth for all that observe the cultural rules, the representation of gender included.

## CONCLUSION

Because the current situation is unstable and the countryside is out of reach, it is impossible to assess in what measures and ways the fact that many women carry the daily burden alone will affect, more generally, the views about gender and

gender roles. Women can, indeed keep working in the name of their dead or disappeared husbands; still bearing in mind the old ideology of a continuity based on fidelity to the family ancestors. The disillusion about the further reaching effects on local communities, society, and nation, of beliefs related to the ritual gender complementarity will probably result in a yet more individualized vision of the family. It is realistic to suppose that the rising generation of women would have other views about their own rights, and be less submissive to men if they were, by law, recognized as equal to them on all grounds. This was, however, far from achieved before the genocide, even after the reform of the law which put daughters at an equal footing with sons as far as succession to land rights was concerned. The fact that a majority of households are now female-headed is no, in itself, a guarantee against oppression. If, then, gender roles remain perceived as unchanged, a majority of women will be oppressed in a very crude manner, that is to say, with very little "*moral*" justification of their exploitation. It also remains to be seen what kind of negotiation the peasant women will be able to achieve with those in power, either male or female.

The hope for change rests with active efforts at providing women who are said to be 70% of household heads now, with structures giving them sufficient knowledge, efficacy and credit to organize without being patronized. There are examples of such attempts but their success can only be achieved on the basis of a democracy aiming at giving all access to basic rights. The old modes of exploitation and patronage could perfectly become, under the guises of feminism, associated with female cosmopolitanism. Peasant women could well submit themselves to its local bearers, as they would see no other avenues to the wider world and its wealth. Conformity would take its toll again. Nothing much could have improved in their daily lives, even if the old vision of an engendered fertile land has vanished.

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