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RADIO AND RWANDAN REBELS IN THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents the findings of a research project undertaken with the objective of understanding the radio-listening habits of Rwandan rebels in the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The intent was also to understand the impact and appreciation of an educational soap opera called *Musekerweya*, which dramatizes messages on conflict prevention and reconciliation. This radio theatre play is broadcast by Radio Rwanda, the Rwandan state broadcaster. In total, 101 ex-rebels of the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR) were consulted during several weeks of fieldwork in 2009.

The FDLR was officially established around the year 2000 and emerged from the remnants of militia, the so-called “Interahamwe,”¹ and the Rwandan Armed Forces (FAR) that fled Rwanda following the 1994 genocide after being defeated by the Rwandan Patriotic Army (RPA), the rebel movement headed by current Rwandan president Paul Kagame. The organization behaves as a “state within the state” in the Kivu region of eastern DRC and is experienced as an occupation force by the local Congolese population (Pole Institute 2010, 10). They are responsible for gross human rights abuses, including rape (Ingelaere and Wilén 2017). The military strength of the FDLR was estimated at approximately 7,000 forces (and thousands of civilian dependents or sympathizers) in 2007 (Romkema 2007, 47). Their numbers continued to decline to an estimated 1,200 to 1,500 forces in 2013 because of losses incurred during military operations, defections to and repatriation in Rwanda (Elbert et al. 2013). Some 8,815 FDLR combatants demobilized and returned to Rwanda in the period 2001 to 2014. Did radio play a role in this process?

We attempt to shed light on this question by examining the impact of a radio theatre play called *Musekeweya*. The program is produced by La Benevolencija Humanitarian Tools Foundation, an international non-governmental organization (NGO) that focuses on societies and individuals targeted by hate speech resulting in large-scale violence. The organization makes use of radio to broadcast educational media programs and soap operas. This soap opera is meant to identify positive and negative models in Rwandan society and to establish and promote positive role models. Exemplary personalities can be identified in the episodes, of which some of the most prominent are actively promoting peace in the conflict between two fictional villages, “Bumanzi” and “Muhumuro.” Although there is no explicit reference to ethnic identities in the soap opera, it is clear — to us and also to the Rwandan audience — that these villages and the nature of their interactions resonate with the Hutu-Tutsi distinction that marks the Rwandan social landscape. The conflict between the villages reverberates with the ethnically polarized and conflict-ridden history of Rwanda.

The storyline develops against the background of crisis, drought and hunger, and the drowning in a river of the daughter of Rutaganira, one of the villagers

1 Interahamwe was initially the name of a militia associated with the ruling political party (Mouvement révolutionnaire national pour le développement) before and during the 1994 genocide in Rwanda. This militia played a major role in the execution of the genocide in Rwanda. During and because of the genocide, the label was used for anyone that had participated in the genocide and, in some cases, for all Hutu. Also currently, the FDLR are generally perceived as Interahamwe.

from Muhumuro.² These conditions open the way to destructive leadership. Rutaganira casts blame on the other village for all of the things going wrong. He manages to become the village headman and, eventually, stages an attack on Bumanzi. The inhabitants of the latter village are traumatized and angry and retaliate in a similar attack that makes most of the inhabitants of Muhumuro seek refuge outside the village.

The aim of these storylines is to identify the roots of destructive leadership and the consequences of violence. But in the midst of this upheaval, significant attention is paid to countervailing trends and positive developments such as active bystanders undertaking moderating and preventive actions. Some people speak out against violence; others offer psychological care to those traumatized by the events. Notably, fictional characters who are young emerge in roles that question the negative actions of elders such as Rutaganira. Gradually, more storylines emerge that focus on questions of reconciliation between the two villages. Eventually, Rutaganira experiences a complete change of mindset and behaviour. He becomes a facilitator of peace and reconciliation. The main story of the conflict and conciliation of the two villages is developed over a long period of time, with many subplots and interesting characters that can attract a diverse audience of attentive listeners.

In the meantime, large-scale scientific studies have established that the soap opera is not only extremely popular, but also has the ability to create changes in the attitudes, knowledge and behaviour of people living on Rwandan soil (Paluck 2009; Staub et al 2005; Bilali and Vollhardt 2013). What remains unclear, however, is whether Rwandan rebels who fled Rwanda toward eastern DRC in the aftermath of the genocide have listened to the radio soap serial and, if this is the case, how they experience the soap opera. Further, did listening to the soap influence their decision to return to Rwanda? These questions informed our research activities.

Next in this chapter is a discussion of the data-gathering activities. This is followed by a presentation of the main sources of information and the radio-listening habits of the rebels while they resided in the DRC. Finally, I discuss the impact of the radio soap and conclude with a reflection on the role of radio in shaping ideas and mindsets in a context of extremely polarized societies.

2 Based on Staub et al. (n.d.).

FIELDWORK AND METHODOLOGY

In the period between September and November 2009, the research team spent several weeks in the demobilization camp Mutobo and in a rural hill/village.³ The demobilization camp is a transit centre where combatants returning from the DRC need to spend a period of approximately three months before they are reintegrated into their communities of origin throughout Rwanda. During this period, the ex-rebels receive an intense program of mainly information and re-education activities. The bulk of the interviews were conducted in the Mutobo camp. At the start of the research activities there were 315 persons residing in the camp. This number had increased to 396 by the end of our stay.

The camp commander and personnel facilitated the initial introduction of the researchers. A former FDLR officer also residing in the camp and with supervising authority over the ex-combatants was appointed as facilitator in the contacts with the ex-rebels. However, all of the interviews were conducted in private and with only the selected group of participants present. Interviews happened in a closed-off room in the demobilization camp or, if the room was not available, in a remote corner on the camp premises.

In addition, the research activities took place in a local community in the northern region. In order to avoid potential influence of the camp environment on the statements of participants to the study, a significant number of interviews were conducted with ex-rebels who had already passed through their three-month period in the camp and returned to their hill of origin. The community where this part of the research took place is located in the north of Rwanda, an area considered to be the heartland of the former regime. Many ex-FDLR combatants originate from the northern region. Fifty-six reintegrated ex-rebels live in the community where the research was conducted.

Focus group discussions were the main research instrument.⁴ The overall research question — did radio play a role in the rebels' demobilization and return to Rwanda? — informed a more detailed discussion guide. The following themes were systematically explored: the overall radio landscape in the DRC;

3 We received, through La Benevolencija, permission from the Rwanda Demobilisation and Reintegration Commission to undertake research activities in the demobilization camp of Mutobo located in the North of Rwanda.

4 Together with two Rwandan translators, I conducted all of the focus group discussions. These two Rwandan collaborators also jointly conducted some of the interviews.

the sources of information and communication in the DRC; the listening habits with respect to Radio Rwanda and, more in particular, the *Musekeweya* radio soap; remarkable episodes and characters in the soap opera; the reality value of *Musekeweya*; the defining factors and obstacles when returning to Rwanda; and radio habits after the return from the DRC. The discussions were systematically and verbatim recorded during the discussions. At a later stage, a code book was constructed and the interviews were systematically coded based on a number of variables to identify trends in the responses. This procedure was complemented by a narrative analysis.

With each interview, we provided a general introduction on the origin and aim of the study. We did not mention that the topic under investigation was the *Musekeweya* soap in order not to suggest any answers with respect to the initial question on popular programs. Anonymity and voluntary participation were stressed. As mentioned, all interviews were conducted in quiet and private places. In a few cases, group discussions were conducted in open air, but always in a remote location free from onlookers or possible disturbance. Twenty focus group discussions were organized with a total of 101 participants. Officers and ordinary "soldiers" were interviewed in separate groups in order to avoid the influence of authority figures over subalterns during the discussions.

A caveat is in order. This chapter presents the findings of a series of discussions with ex-rebels who have returned to Rwanda. Some of the FDLR rebels have not returned to Rwanda, at least not yet. The perspective is therefore limited to returnees. The experience and appreciation of the combatants still residing in eastern DRC might be different. Nevertheless, the discussion with the ex-combatants reveals important insights regarding the process of deciding whether to return to Rwanda or not. It can be assumed that all combatants listening to the radio in the DRC, and listening to *Musekeweya* in particular, undergo a similar reflection process, which is our focus here.

SOURCES OF INFORMATION AND RADIO-LISTENING HABITS

Radio is the primary source of information among FDLR combatants in the DRC. Telephone and visitors are also frequently mentioned as means of communication: "(1) & (2) Radio was our primary source of information.

(1) We could also find information over telephone when family members called us. (2) We also managed to find information through people coming to visit us.”⁵

During discussion with the ex-rebels, a total of 37 different radio stations were listed. The most popular radio stations were the BBC, Voice of America, Radio Rwanda and Radio Okapi. News and radio soaps were very popular genres. The most popular programs named by participants were *Urunana* and *Musekeweya*, two radio soaps broadcast by Radio Rwanda. Most of the ex-rebels participating in the group discussions followed the weekly broadcasts of *Musekeweya*.

Radio Rwanda is one of the most popular radio stations among the FDLR in the DRC. Radio Rwanda broadcasts in Kinyarwanda, the language of the Rwandans living in Congo. They listen to Radio Rwanda to follow the developments in their country and to understand what is or might be happening with friends and family members in Rwanda.

(Interviewer) Do you also listen to Radio Rwanda? And if so, why do you listen to Radio Rwanda? (1) I listened to Radio Rwanda because I was able to receive its signal anywhere in Congo. (2) I often listened to Radio Rwanda [while in Congo] since the station is broadcasting in a language I can understand. (3) I tuned in on Radio Rwanda because it's my country's radio station, it has good programs. (4) As a Rwandan abroad, I listened to Radio Rwanda to understand what was happening in my country.⁶

(Interviewer) Do you also listen to Radio Rwanda? And if so, why do you listen to Radio Rwanda? (1) We loved to listen to certain types of programs, such as soaps. But we also wanted to know how the [Rwandan] state media reported on the operations of the army. (2) We really wanted to know more about the situation in our country and [Radio Rwanda] is broadcasting in a language we understand.⁷

During all discussions, focus group members referred to radio as an important instrument of communication and source of information but telephone and

5 Focus group discussion (FGD) “soldiers” – demobilization camp “Mutobo”; 30/09/2009; (1) corporal, male, single, 28 years old; (2) corporal, male, single, 25 years old.

6 FGD “soldiers” – demobilization camp “Mutobo”; 11/10/2009; (1) private first class, male, single, 25 years old; (2) corporal, male, married, 37; (3) private first class, male, single, 28 years old; (4) corporal, male, married, 35 years old.

7 FGD group “soldiers” – returned to hill (village) – Northern Province; 13/10/2009; (1) private first class, male, single, 29 years old; (2) corporal, male, married, 43 years old.

visitors were noted as more persuasive. Especially for information on Rwanda, the Rwandans living in the DRC rely on information provided by family and friends through phone calls or personal visits. We explore this issue further since it is an important element to understand the motivation to leave the DRC and return to Rwanda. Although information received through radio messages and programs provided the ex-rebels with an overall framework to understand social and political developments in Rwanda and the region in general, personalized contact was a preferred source of information in considering if these reports of developments were to be trusted or not.

IMPACT OF THE RADIO SOAP OPERA

The story of the two villages, Bumanzi and Muhumuro, as it is presented in the *Musekeweya* soap is, according to the ex-combatants, the story of Rwanda: “(1) What is played [dramatized] in *Musekeweya* looks like reality. (2) One plays what happened during the genocide until [what is happening] now. (3) One talks about war, killings on the basis of ethnicity, the destruction of goods, exile, prison, the refusal to marry because of ethnicity and pardon as is happening during the period after the genocide.”⁸

However, while still in the DRC, most of the participants in the group discussions said they questioned the reality of what is being dramatized in *Musekeweya* regarding what was actually happening in the most recent period in Rwandan history, namely reconciliation. It was only at a later stage, they said, when they effectively returned to Rwanda, that they also started to accept this theme as a reference to an existing reality in Rwanda: “When we were in Congo we thought that this theatre play ‘*Musekeweya*’ was some sort of propaganda to incite us to return to our country. Because knowing what had happened in Rwanda during the genocide, we were thinking that it was impossible that Hutu and Tutsi could reconcile.”⁹

They relate the conflict between the villages to their own position as combatants in a war between two parties. As much as they were eager to find out which party was going to win in the soap, they were also wondering who was going to win in the conflict in which they were personally involved. Some make the explicit link with their own situation in the DRC. *Musekeweya* made them

8 FGD “soldiers” – demobilization camp “Mutobo”; 08/10/2009; (1) corporal, male, single, 23 years old; (2) private first class, male, single, 32 years old; (3) staff sergeant, male, married, 59 years old.

9 FGD “soldiers” – demobilization camp “Mutobo”; 11/10/2009; corporal, male, married, 37 years old.

reflect on whether they had the “correct ideas” on Rwanda in the DRC. They also wondered whether they could resist the FDLR leadership: “I liked the way we were told that we are the same, that there are no differences between people, that we need to complement each other. Another thing I appreciate is the fact that we are told how to ask for pardon after admitting one was wrong. In Congo, before coming to Rwanda, we always asked ourselves the question: are we right or wrong?”¹⁰

The theme of reconciliation underlies a great number of the most striking episodes mentioned by the ex-rebels. The overall theme of reconciliation between the villages is — according to the former FDLR members — a remarkable element in the *Musekeweya* story. Especially the ex-rebels with a lower rank reveal that the events and characters in *Musekeweya* made them question their own behaviour, position and convictions. The fictional characters Rutaganira and Gahayima are most cited as characters they identify with or would want to play if they had the chance to participate in the theatre play. The behavioural change that characterizes Rutaganira is remarkable to them, and some of the narratives collected explicitly refer to a reflection process some of them underwent in Congo as a result of Rutaganira’s change from instigator of violence to broker of peace and reconciliation: “To me, the most remarkable character is Rutaganira, he resembles many of us.”¹¹ “I would like to be Rutaganira because I am like him. Considering how I hated people who were not on my side and how, now, I am really loved in the community [here in Rwanda].”¹²

A similar type of reasoning underlies the identification with Gahayima. His humour is attractive to them, but the fact that he has a gun also makes him a popular figure. Yet with his gun he shoots bullets of peace, an activity that is not only “funny” but also invites a reflection on their own activities: “Me, I would like to play the role of Gihayima who is shooting bullets of peace with his gun.”¹³ “I was touched by Gihayima. Because me too, I need to take the ‘peace gun’ because peace will always prevail.”¹⁴

10 FGD “soldiers” – returned to hill (village) – Northern Province; 12/11/2009; corporal, male, married, 44 years old.

11 FGD “soldiers” – demobilization camp “Mutobo”; 01/10/2009; corporal, male, single, 30 years old.

12 FGD “soldiers” – returned to hill (village) – Northern Province; 12/11/2009; sergeant, male, single, 28 years old.

13 FGD “soldiers” – demobilization camp “Mutobo”; 08/10/2009; private first class, male, single, 32 years old.

14 FGD “soldiers” – demobilization camp “Mutobo”; 30/09/2009; corporal, male, single, 24 years old.

Although there is clear evidence of deeper reflections facilitated by listening to the radio theatre, many of them refer to the humour of the characters, for instance, one of the characters’ greedy love for meat. The situation is a bit different for officers. Discussions with groups of former FDLR officers show that, unlike the ordinary soldiers, a significant number of them were (and are) reluctant to question their own mindsets based on the messages underlying *Musekeweya*. They also listen to the soap but especially for its distracting aspect, the humour and the fact that the stories that are presented resonate with common human sentiments — love, marriage, jealousy and so on: “(1) In the beginning we thought this [the soap] was simply humor. (2) We did not see the hidden lesson. (3) When we were in Congo, for us, unity and reconciliation did not exist in Rwanda. (4) There was a certain ideology [accentuating] that we were all of the Hutu living there in Congo, because we were convinced that all Hutu had been killed. Arriving in Rwanda, I realized I was wrong because I met Hutu like me that had really progressed in life.”

This last statement reveals an important theme that surfaced during the discussion with the officers: not only the importance of ideology within the ranks of the FDLR, but also the extent to which *Musekeweya* should be considered propaganda expressing the ideology of the new powerholders in Rwanda. I return to this issue in the conclusion of this chapter.

RETURNING TO RWANDA

The ex-rebels were asked to enumerate and discuss a range of obstacles encountered in the process of deciding whether or not to return to Rwanda. Apart from the issue of information on Rwanda, a more practical concern is the problem of accessing the demobilization points in the DRC. Frequently, it was mentioned that the Forces armées de la République démocratique du Congo (FARDC), the Congolese army, blocks the avenues to the repatriation points of the UN mission in the DRC. The economic advantages acquired during the stay in Congo are also a factor that makes it difficult for ex-rebels to return to Rwanda. It is not easy to leave behind the natural wealth and wide availability of land in the DRC to return to Rwanda, where land is scarce and the economic situation in rural areas precarious. A return to Rwanda is also hampered by fear. The issue of lacking trustworthy information on actual developments in Rwanda and the clash of ideologies were frequently mentioned during these discussions.

(1) The biggest obstacle for people wanting to return to the country was the inability to access the repatriation areas. (2) There are people that committed genocide in Rwanda and they are afraid to return to the country. (3) Other people have large tracts of land in Congo and have nothing in Rwanda. (4) [The biggest obstacle preventing return is] the propaganda of those who have committed genocide in Rwanda. They actually constitute the leadership [of the FDLR] and are standing in the way of younger members willing to return to Rwanda. (All) [talking together]: the main reason preventing people from returning to Rwanda is the propaganda of the [FDLR] commanders and the impossibility to reach the repatriation points.¹⁵

(1) Among the obstacles to return to the country are the rumors that there are still massacres going on in Rwanda. (2) We were told that no Hutu could find a way of making a living in Rwanda, even if he was educated. (3) There is also the problem of accessing the demobilization areas. [The United Nations] are not established in every zone [in the DRC] to assist people wanting to return to Rwanda. You need to hand yourself over to Congolese military and these soldiers confiscate everything one has. Therefore, people are afraid to return. (1) Sharing of land with the refugees from 1959: this arrangement demotivates people to return. And there is the ideology of the FDLR leadership sensitizing people not to return to Rwanda. (All) [talking together]: the main obstacle preventing the return of all [Hutu] refugees is the propaganda of the FDLR commanders making sure people do not return.¹⁶

FDLR-related issues are mentioned prominently as important factors that made the ex-rebels' return to Rwanda possible. They cited the overall lack of objectives of the movement, conflicts in the FDLR leadership and the incompetence of the FDLR leaders. The war situation and hard life in eastern DRC and the fact that many among the combatants were separated from their families still living in Rwanda are also frequently mentioned factors.

The changing nature of Rwanda and the availability of "trustworthy" information about those changes have greatly facilitated the return of ex-rebels to Rwanda. It is evident that radio broadcasts have played a major role in the spread of this changed image, but the most persuasive information came from telephone conversations with family members in Rwanda or visitors returning from Rwanda.

15 FGD "soldiers" – demobilization camp "Mutobo"; 10/10/2009 (1) corporal, male, single, 28 years old; (2) corporal, male, single, 27 years old; (3) corporal, male, married, 40 years old; (4) corporal, male, married, 40 years old.

16 FGD "soldiers" – demobilization camp "Mutobo"; 01/10/2009; (1) corporal, male, single, 29 years old; (2) corporal, male, married, 40 years old; (3) corporal, male, single, 29 years old.

CONCLUSION

Although there is no clear evidence that radio or a radio soap such as *Musekweya* played a decisive role in the final decision of ex-rebels to return home, it is clear that the radio soap has been somehow at work in a dynamic of competing ideologies and mindsets. Scott Straus (2015, 330) is convinced that, in the context of mass violence, ideology and ideas shape decision making in "subtle but profound ways." Ideology played a decisive role in the dynamics that led to genocide against Tutsi and remains important in understanding the post-genocide situation.

The 1994 genocide against Tutsi was sustained by a set of beliefs rooted in theories of racial superiority, the so-called "Hamitic hypothesis" in which Tutsi were presented as outsiders who had conquered and subjugated the majority group, the Hutu. This was complemented by a peasant ideology reinforcing the exclusion of Tutsi since they were portrayed as not real "peasants," but herders (Verwimp 2004, 2013). Radio was an important instrument to spread these ideas throughout Rwandan society. The narratives discussed in this chapter and the few studies that exist on the FDLR in eastern DRC suggest that this pre-genocide ideological framework is structuring this politico-military movement and animating the mindset of its combatants (Rafti 2006; Hedlund 2015, 2017). Anna Hedlund, who conducted extensive research with the FDLR residing in the DRC, emphasizes how the FDLR remakes the history of Rwanda in general and contests the 1994 genocide in particular. These objectives are deeply political and part of military strategy. The narratives presented in this chapter underscore this process.

Since the end of the genocide, the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) is promoting a radically different interpretation of Rwandan history and aims to reconfigure the political and societal narrative. Central is the notion of "Rwandanicity," or "Rwandanness," which asserts that before the arrival of colonialism, Rwandans were one unified people (Republic of Rwanda 2006, 167–85). According to this narrative, the colonial powers divided what had been a harmonious and egalitarian society. This ultimately culminated in the 1994 mass slaughter of Tutsi. This narrative praises the activities of the RPF, stopping the genocide in 1994 and divisionism altogether, and warns for the persistence of this "genocide ideology." But there is a thin line between re-education and political indoctrination, also on this side of the Rwandan border (Mgbako 2005; Ingelaere 2010). The attempt to change mindsets can be seen as a strategy to achieve hegemonic control (Waldorf 2011; Thomson 2011; Revntiens 2013; Purdékova 2015).

Media, and radio in particular, played a crucial role in the 1994 genocide against Tutsi (Thompson 2007). The conversations with ex-FDLR combatants demonstrate that radio continues to play an important role in the Rwanda socio-political landscape, especially with respect to the clash of ideologies, the shaping of mindsets and ideas. Overall, the findings suggest that more attention must be paid to this ideational dimension — ideas, beliefs, worldviews, ideology, cognitive structures — in the study of violence and genocide prevention, since this dimension has in recent years been obscured by a dominant focus on economic and situational logics (Gutiérrez Sanin and Wood 2014; see also Straus 2015). Not only the mobilizing capacities of media broadcasts need to be taken into account, but also the ways mindsets of combatants and ex-combatants are to be changed.

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