

# Alexandre Kimenyi : Biography

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## Biography

I am a native of Rwanda. I came to the United States in 1971 as a Fulbright Fellow to pursue my graduate studies at UCLA hoping to go back and contribute to the development of my country. I never saw my family and friends since. I ended up becoming an American citizen, instead due to the massacre of my family members and my friends in 1973 because of their Tutsi ethnicity and the 1994 Tutsi genocide which exterminated almost all my entire family : parents, paternal and maternal uncles and aunts, brothers and sisters, cousins, nephews and nieces. To get a resident status in the US was not easy, however. I applied for political asylum but it was rejected by INS on the grounds that my country was democratic. This was the period of the cold war. The two superpowers were at each other's throat and the US was supporting dictators everywhere such as Marcos of the Philippines, Sese Seko Mobutu of Zaire now the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Shah of Iran, Pinochet of Chile, Somaza of Nicaragua, etc. because they were not communist. I was able to get my permanent residency because of my job through the Labor Department.

Although I am a linguist by training and profession, I decided to pur-

sue research and studies in both ethnic studies and genocide and holocaust studies in order to understand the beastly behavior of 'the man's inhumanity to man' and started also to develop courses related to this phenomenon. In a sense, my whole life has been shaped by events. I don't understand how other people can plan their future.

I didn't even plan my career and field of study, either. When I was still in primary school, I wanted to go to the seminary because of the influence of the the school's principal who was a priest wanted me to. When it was time to go to high school I changed my mind. The priest became angry and made sure I could not be accepted by the school I had selected. I ended up by going to the one I hated, Collège du Christ-Roi at Nyanza because of the Belgian priest, Father NAVEAU, a mean individual. He was vice-rector of the school and for some unexplained reasons had a visceral hatred against Tutsi. In this boarding school, he would, in the middle of night, without any warning or explanation, wake up and expell all the brightest and most intelligent Tutsi students who had excellent grades. I was lucky because when I was admitted, he didn't stay there long. Despite this hostile environment, I had a very good

education there, because the majority of the teachers, all foreigners were excellent and apolitical and unbiased.

I wanted to go to medical school after my high school graduation. I ended up majoring in Modern Languages instead studying Kinyarwanda, English and French as an undergrad student. Upon graduation, the government decided to refuse entry to Tutsi students from my school to the National University. Toward the end of the first academic year, however, I heard my name on the national radio ordering me to report to National Institute of Pedagogy (IPN). This school was newly founded and supported by UNESCO and its goal was to train enough teachers for the country. To keep getting financing by UNESCO the institute had to have enough students. The government was thus forced to find the minimum number of students that UNESCO requested and that is how I was picked. Since I was admitted in the middle of the academic year, the government was thinking that I would fail. I didn't because the professors were foreigners and didn't know about the government's official policy of discrimination against Tutsi. I was the only Tutsi from my high school to be admitted at the Institute because government officials had found me to be the least evil among my Tutsi classmates.

I also came to the US also against the will of the government. It wanted to replace me with somebody else but the US embassy refused. Indeed, the previous year my friends Gérard RURANGIRWA and Tatien NTAGANDA who was killed together with his wife and all his children during the 1994 genocide were awarded the Fulbright Fellowship but the government was able to replace them with Hutu students.

Because of the US pressure and the threat that these fellowships will be suspended if we were not allowed to come, me and my friend Justin NSABIMANA who was able to survive genocide but whose wife and children were savagely massacred, were finally authorized to leave the country and given Rwandan passports, an exceptional event. I am always wondering why I have always been the lucky one : to be admitted to high school, to be allowed to go to college, to get the Fulbright Fellowship, to be one of the few in my extended family to survive. This question always haunts me.

## Social and political activism

I have always been sensitive to social injustice even when I was a child. I witnessed the massacre of innocent civilians during the so-called « *Hutu Revolution* » in which thousands of ordinary Tutsi, children, old people, peasants, intellectuals with the support of the Belgian colonial government and the blessing of the Catholic church. The Catholic archbishop at that time was a Swiss called André PERRAUDIN. He is the one who anointed Grégoire KAYIBANDA, his private secretary, founder and chairman of Parmehutu (part for hutus) as the first President of RWANDA. This is also the first date of the Tutsi exodus to different parts of the world where they were condemned to stay until RPF captured Kigali after the 1994 Tutsi genocide. The 'Hutu Revolution' is really a euphemism for mass killings of innocent civilians. It was not orchestrated by Hutus but by the Belgian colonial power. Rwanda became independant in 1962, three years later after this 'Hutu revolution'. There is no way then that

these senseless killings could have taken place without the authorization of the Belgian ruling power of that time. Another indication that Belgians were the mastermind of the 'Hutu Revolution' is that many Hutu nationalists or monarchists were also massacred and thousands of them had to flee the country as well.

From 1959 until RPF took over, the Tutsi who stayed in Rwanda were disenfranchised and denied all their basic rights and this culminated in their extermination in the 1994 genocide.

I spoke out and wrote about these injustices. In high school, I was exposed to and very much influenced by the existentialist philosophers Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, especially his novel the Plague. Other activist intellectuals who have shaped my life are Noam Chomsky, Bertrand Russell, Albert Einstein, Franz Fanon, and W.E.B Dubois. Kwamé N'krumah, Patrice Lumumba, Che Guevara, King Mutara III Rudahigwa, Malcolm X, Thomas Sankara, Fred Rwigema have also to a large extent affected my life as role models for their courage, unselfish love for their fellow human beings and their gospel of human solidarity. To take concrete actions, however, came as a result of my association with my colleagues and friends, David Covin and Otis L. Scott. Because of them, I joined the Sacramento Area Black Caucus, an association whose purpose is to empower black people in the Sacramento area. I was at a time the vice president of this organization and editor-in-chief of its newspaper, The Speaking Drum. I immediately understood also that to be effective, it was necessary to focus, rank and hierarchize causes that one chooses to work for. Because being involved in all just

causes, one gets stretched thin, wasting energy, resources and time. It is through this organization that I remembered the plight of of stateless Tutsi refugees who had been condemned to live in exile since 1959. It is in this context that in 1982, I started the journal IMPURUZA to mobilize and 'conscientize' the Rwandan refugees all over the world about their natural right to return to their homeland. Its impact was the birth and creation of many Rwandan refugee associations all over the world. And in August, 1988, with the help of the association ABD « USA » (Association of Banyarwanda in Diaspora) and US Committee for Refugees headed by Roger Winter, I organized the First international Conference on Rwandan Refugees in Washington, D.C. To shift the world's attention from this conference, the Rwandan government of General Habyarimana decided to arm Burundian Hutu rebels to go and kill Tutsi in the Northern part of Burundi in what is known as Ntega-Marangara mass killings. These killings were attributed to the Burundi government and claims were made that it had massacred Hutu when in reality it was the opposite. The majority of the victims were Rwandan Tutsi refugees. I also understood that the only way the voice of these refugees could be heard was joining a political movement. That's why I decided to join RPF (the Rwandan Patriotic Front) to achieve these objectives and was appointed to the Executive Committee as Director of Research and Documentation. RPF didn't have any difficulty obtaining members and support because the ground work had already been done. All these associations became part of it.

## Why I become a dissident of RPF

I am presently the President of the political party AMAHORO-PC. AMAHORO means 'peace' in Kinyarwanda, and PC stands for People's Congress. Members of AMAHORO are former RPF members, former other party members such as MDR, PL, PSD and independents.

Millions of people especially in the diaspora joined RPF because of its attractive political program. When RPF got in power, however, it was hijacked by a group of individuals who betrayed the ideas and ideals which had made it a very popular movement.

When I left RPF, the government declared that I did it because I was refused the position of Prime Minister. These are false accusations. In a 1997, RPF members issued a document labelled the Michigam Memo which denounced the hijacking of the movement by a group of individuals which was conducting policies and issuing unpopular declarations in the name of RPF without its members' consultation and approval. Previously all the movement's decisions were taken by RPF Congress. To assert that all I did for RPF and the country was motivated by my desire to become prime minister is without any foundation. I have no desire to occupy any political position. If in 1994, I was offered any position, I would have accepted without any hesitation but as a sacrifice because I understand that I have to fulfill my citizenship responsibilities especially in that critical time when few individuals were left to perform many tasks in rebuilding the country's infrastructure. Now, I would not trade my university position with any other pro-

fession on earth. I am paid to do things that I enjoy. To me I don't know any other profession as exciting and rewarding as being a university professor. I advise students to seriously consider this option before they choose their career.

When I was elected to be President of AMAHORO-People's Congress, I made it clear to the congress participants that I will help in the building of the party but I will never assume any political position when it joins the government. I have won the wrath of my former comrades in the struggle who are now in power because of my opinions. I have not understood, either, why my suggestion of creating a Ministry of Genocide would anger the Rwandan authorities whose legitimacy comes from the international community belief that they stopped genocide. RPF defeated and removed a genocidal regime. It is a fact and it should be congratulated for that. It did not stop genocide, however, because there no single part of the country where genocide didn't take place. The genocide spread even beyond the Rwandan borders after RPF's victory when Laurent Kabila, the President of the Democratic Republic of Congo, gave orders to exterminate all ethnic Tutsi in DRC. Many of my friends inside Rwanda have advised me to keep quiet if I want to visit the country. I wish I could but I can't. This is the price I have to pay. I truly believe that academicians have a responsibility to be concerned with social and political issues. Most of us do research not to advance the world but for selfish intellectual pleasure and curiosity, which is legitimate. Even if we are doing it to make this world a better place to live, it doesn't make sense to keep quiet

and act as if things are normal, when people whose lives our research is supposed to improve are having their basic rights violated. I have also been lucky to be associated with the Ethnic Studies Department because all my colleagues are convinced that we should not live in the Ivory Tower confined in the halls of the academe without being involved in social, economical and political issues that affect our society. All of us are affected by bad political policies. And we should be concerned.

### **My position on the African situation**

I believe that the West is still responsible for the political instability we see in Africa and its continued underdeveloping. My people argue that after 40 years of independence we should not be blaming colonialism and neocolonialism for the many problems the continent is experiencing right now. My response is that for Africa has to get out of this situation, it needs a Marshall Plan or compensations and that the West has a moral responsibility to provide it and the sooner the better. If Japan and Germany were recipients of these programs after the wars that they started, why didn't Africa benefit from these programs after the atrocities it was victim of by European countries? Outsiders are convinced that Africans are victims of problems of their own making. This is a classical example of blaming the victim.

Nation-building is a long process. The post-colonial ethnic conflicts found in many African countries are a legacy of the 1885-6 Berlin Conference on the Partition of Africa. At that conference, artificial countries were

carved arbitrarily, without taking into consideration natural, national, cultural and linguistic boundaries, but looking at the colonialists' interests, instead. Families and relatives were separated. The same ethnic groups found themselves this time in different countries and many nations ceased to exist. Because of the « *divide and rule* » strategy, the new conquerors also favored some groups than others. The ethnic conflicts found today are attempts to right the wrongs of colonialism.

The purpose of colonialization in Africa was not investment or development or importing the so-called « *Western values* » but a brutal and vicious maximum exploitation of its natural and human resources. The books of Walter Rodney, *How Europe helped to underdevelop Africa* and Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost : A Story of Greed, Terror and Heroism in Colonial Africa* are very eloquent on this subject. Not only were natural resources taken but millions and millions of Africans had to die. Forced labor without any remuneration was imposed everywhere. It consisted of doing dangerous jobs, in terrible working conditions in mines and in road and railroad construction. Many times people were buried alive in mines. Dynamites which were used to break rocks would also make mountains and rocks fall on them burying them alive as well. Today the African landscape is littered with carcasses of mountains and valleys unsuitable for any kind of life, human, animal or plant. Those who were unable to do these hard jobs were either killed, mutilated or tortured. I was born in the dying days of colonialism. I witnessed its atrocities. I know many people who lived in the bushes, hiding because they were unable to pay "the body

tax". All males who reached 18 years, had to pay a 'body tax', regardless of whether they had money, a job or property. People had to carry a receipt with them everywhere all the time. The police would also raid people's homes in the middle of night to find out if everybody had paid the body tax. Women's body tax was payed by their husbands. People were thus forced to find work or sell their cattle or property not for themselves but to be able to pay for these taxes. Count de Burgrave, a Belgian butcher, had been authorized to go to villages and take any people's cows he wanted for Belgians' meat consumption. There was no compensation to the cows' owners. Cows' owners had also to deliver a certain number of milk liters every day to the Belgian administrators. Those who failed were severely punished. Colonialism not only deprived people of their basic rights but it also impoverished everybody.

There is also ample evidence even in the public domain that the West was involved in the assassination and the overthrow of nationalist and Pan-Africanist leaders replacing them with corrupt, brutal and incompetent puppets such as Seseko Mobutu, Idi Amin, Emperor Bokassa, Sergeant Samuel Doe and more. The Belgian government has accepted its responsibility in Patrice Lumumba's assassination but it has not done anything for compensation. Neocolonialism and the cold war have not only resulted in the destruction of African countries, political instability and economic stagnation but in the massacres of thousands of intellectuals as well. Philip Agee's book, *Dirty Work II : CIA in Africa* gives a chocking, disturbing and detailed account of how Western intelligencies

have been actively involved in assassinations of African leaders and nationalists.

Because of the West farmers' subsidies by their respective governments, African farmers cannot sell their cash crops. These cash crops namely, cotton, sugar cane, coffee, tea, tobacco, were introduced during the colonial period destroying the fields for staple crops fields (beans, rice, sorghum, . . . ) which explains also some areas suffer from famine and endemic food shortage. African farm products which are the only source of hard currency cannot compete with Western subsidized cheap crops in the international market.

IMF and the World Bank are also destabilizing Africa instead of helping it. For African governments to function, they need to borrow money and the only banks that give loans with many strings attached, unfortunately, and a very high interest are the two financial institutions mentioned. The structural adjustments are destroying the continent : these are democratization, privatization, devaluation of currency, the downsizing of the work force and the military. Democracy doesn't mean just rushing to elections. These elections don't mean anything since many times people who seized to power by guns are the ones who get reelected. Privatization of state parastatals also breeds corruption since the government officials sell them to themselves or to their cronies. Devaluation makes goods expensive and forces many well-to-do Africans to take their money to Western banks where it is safe. When people are fired from their jobs, the whole economy suffers and all sectors of the society are affected : banks, schools, businesses, etc.

Colonialism, neo-colonialism, the cold war, the unfair Western trade policies and the structural adjustment programs of IMF and the World Bank are clearly the ones which are responsible for Africa's predicaments.

To come out of this vicious circle, a Marshall Plan is of the essence. African leaders should put pressure on Western countries reminding them to fulfill their moral obligation. If Western countries don't want to provide this Marshall Plan, they should thus pay compensations for all they robbed from Africa and their responsibility for its current misery. I hope that the government of Rwanda, for instance, is going to demand compensation from France because of the Francois Mitterrand's government's role in the Tutsi genocide. There is a legal precedent for this. The US government apologized to Japanese-Americans for wrongful treatment during World War II and agreed to a financial compensation of \$20,000 for each prison camp internee. The apology and the compensation came as a result from the pressure from the Japanese-Americans and the Japanese government.

### **My Position on Linguistics**

I completely agree with Noam Chomsky that language is biologically based.

The arguments which support this position are very clear and simple. One : there are linguistic universals : rules which govern the sound system (phonetics and phonology), word formation (morphology) and the structure of sentences (syntax), which are found in all languages and cannot be violated. Two : this has to do with language acquisition. In all languages. By

the age of five, all children have already mastered all the rules of their native languages. Those who don't at this age, cannot acquire them later. Clearly everything as language is concerned is pre-programmed and wired into the genes.

The strongest argument is the unconscious mind and the rules that ordinary people cannot create. There is an independent software responsible for this. Look at the following examples from Kinyarwanda.

#### **The Complex Consonant Formation**

Kinyarwanda has complex consonants which result from prenasalization and gliding. This phenomenon is discussed in my two books : *Studies in Kinyarwanda and Bantu Phonology* (1989) and *A Tonal Grammar of Kinyarwanda : An autosegmental and Metrical Account* (2002). If a consonant is preceded by a nasal and followed by a glide (semi-vowels y and w), the nasal takes the place of articulation of that consonant (lips, alveolar ridge, hard palatal or soft palate). In return, the consonant is aspirated becoming an h if it is voiceless. A new consonant which assimilates to the place of articulation of the glide on its right and the voice or nasal features of the preceding consonant, thus being realized as k, g, n if the glide is the labiovelar w and k, g, n if it is the palatal y, is also inserted between the original consonant and the glide.

This rule is formally formulated mathematically as follows :

rule

The symbol O on the left means zero sound and that this zero becomes a sound with the features indicated after the arrow sign. The letters in front the phonetic features refer to the presence or absence of that feature (+ or

-).

This sophisticated and elegant mathematical rule is clearly a product of the brain linguistic software. There is no way a child or any average adult speaker can make up this rule.

Tone rules also belong to the microlinguistic level out of reach of the conscious mind.

Tone rules discussed in my 2002 book, *A Tonal Grammar of Kinyarwanda*, namely Beat Movement, Beat Addition, Beat Deletion, Beat Alternation, Iambic Reversal, etc show again that they exist independently of the conscious mind. In this language, one high tone is assigned to a morpheme (stem and affixes). If prefixes are added to a stem which has this high tone, a prosodic domain is created placing a high tone on its first mora. Tones rules then take place between the far left mora to the rightmost mora which carries the initial lexical tone. I refer to this tone behavior as a U-turn phenomenon. These rules cannot be obviously controlled by the language speakers.

At the macrolevel : morphology, syntax and semantics, there is also evidence of the autonomy of language from the conscious mind. This is also discussed in my book *A Relational Grammar of Kinyarwanda* (1980) and my on-going research on the *Anatomy of the Metaphor*.

In *A Relational Grammar of Kinyarwanda*, it is shown that nouns have to change positions in the sentence structure and that verbs change forms when these nouns are assigned different grammatical functions. Syntactic and morphological rules responsible for these changes also seem to be outside the control of the conscious mind. The linguistic underlying struc-

ture also known as the mental structure is different from the surface structure. That is utterances that come out of the mouth : segments, suprasegments, morphemes and sentences are not the same as how they are represented in the mind. They have to undergo changes through the mind's computational rules.

In the *Anatomy of the Metaphor*, I show that conceptual metaphors are universal and created independently of language users.

All these examples clearly show that language is genetically programmed and is not a product of society. This ofcourse goes against the tenants of the « *blank slates* » hypothesis who claim that children are born with « *tabula rasa* » and acquire language from stimulus-response as advanced by behaviorarists such as E.B. Skinner.

### **On the Arbitrariness of the Linguistic Sign**

In mainstream linguistics, linguistic signs (sounds, words and structures) are thought to be arbitrary. This idea originates from Ferdinand de Saussure, father of modern linguistics. This position comes from the fact that many descriptive and theoretical linguists look at language only synchronically. I take the position of Charles Sanders Peirce that signs whether they are linguistic or non-verbal are classified into three categories, namely icons, indices and symbols.

Icons are signs which have similarity with objects they stand for. Indices have an association with objects they represent and symbols are signs whose relationship with objects they represent is opaque. It is true that the majority of signs are found in the category of symbols. This doesn't support the 'arbitrariness' position but



Peirce's view instead, because for any system to function, it has to cease to be iconic and become symbolic. In my work, *Anatomy of the Metaphor* and my 1994 Outstanding Scholarly Achievement Award Lecture *Iconicity of Language*, I give strong arguments and ample examples which argue against the arbitrariness of linguistic sign.

### **The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis**

It is still an open question in linguistics and anthropology as to whether language affects the way people think, see and understand the world they live in and has impact on their lives. This debate is referred to as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. It is here that the concepts of linguistic relativity and linguistic determinism originate. My research supports both concepts, especially my two articles *Kinship Terms in Kinyarwanda* and *Cow Metaphors in Kinyarwanda*. Rwanda has an extended family structure in which the same linguistic term refers to individuals who are not necessarily biologically related. For instance the term *umuvandimwe* 'sibling' refers to biological siblings but also to the children of the father's brothers and the mother's sisters' children. The concept of cousin *umubyara* exists in this language but it refers only to the father's sisters' children and the mother's brothers' children.

Those whose offspring are called siblings are also referred to as father and mother. The father is the real father and his brothers and the mother, the real mother and her sisters. The father's sisters' children and the mother's brothers' children are called *ababyara* 'cousins', literally meanings 'those with whom you can have children', because the father's sister is an aunt and the mother's brother is an

uncle. This nomenclature is important because it determines kins' behavior to each other and their respective responsibilities. For instance, traditionally, it was allowed to marry a cousin. Marrying your father's sister's child or your mother's brother's child was normal but to marry your father's brother's child or your mother's sister's child was condemned as an incest.

The article *Cow Metaphors* shows that the cow has integrated the whole culture. Not only is it a national symbol but it is also the embodiment of beauty, grace and elegance. It is the primary inspiration of artists. Cow poetry *Amazina y'Inka* ranks first among the elite poetry namely dynastic poetry (praise-poems for kings), panegyric poetry (praise-poems national heroes and great warriors) and pastoral poetry (praise-poems for noble cows). Female folk dances imitate the elegance of the cows and its beautiful long horns. Cow vocabulary is found in every day language as in greetings, swearing and metaphors. Like the buffalo among Plains' Indians, everything from the cow is utilized, including its waste, dung and urine.

Thus the kinship terminology and cow metaphors are examples which convincingly show that not only the same phenomenon is perceived and understood differently in various cultures (linguistic relativity) but also shapes and affects their thinking (linguistic determinism). Even within the same speech community people may perceive and conceive the same phenomenon differently, as illustrated by the following examples. There are people who see Sacramento as « *sitting between Roseville and Davis* », « *standing between Roseville and Davis* », « *lying between Roseville and Davis* »,

« *sprawling between Roseville and Davis* », « *overlooking Davis* », « *leaning to Roseville* », etc. The proverbial cliché to see the glass half-full or half-empty or the expressions to see things through the lens/prism of, from the standpoint of, also lends support to linguistic determinism.

The study of color terms by anthropologists and psycholinguistics also supports the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis. Some languages have more color terms than others. Speakers of languages which have less color terms see only the colors that exist in their language. This is a clear case of linguistic determinism.

#### **Problems in American Linguistics**

Linguistics is not about ideas or opinions but facts. It is an empirical discipline. Theories and hypotheses have to be supported by so-

lid data from natural languages. Obviously theories which cannot withstand empirical evidence are already fatally flawed. There are unfortunately theories or claims which are made before linguistic investigation. This approach and method should be abandoned. Like in other sciences such as biology good solid data collected from all languages all over the world should be examined before formulating universal linguistic theories. Many times, hypotheses even good intuitions are confused with realities and this should be avoided. In many universities theoretical linguists have more respect than descriptive linguists. This attitude is of ranking higher armchair research to fieldwork research is obviously counterintuitive and wrong. A good linguist has to be good at both theory and description.

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