

Polarisation over 'too big' genocide report

The genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda remains a source of heated, antagonistic debate. Even academic journals set aside professional ethics when convenient, regardless of the consequences for the victims.

By Jos van Oijen

A remarkable research paper by Belgian academic Luc Reydam's about the human rights organisation African Rights (AR) is full of errors and faulty statements. This is the conclusion of seven Rwanda experts in *Human Rights Quarterly (HRQ)*, the scholarly journal that published the disputed paper two years ago. "Reydam's fails to carry out the most basic research", the critics write.

Reydam's has come under fire mainly for his contention that a landmark report about the Tutsi-genocide in Rwanda was a co-production of AR and Paul Kagame's Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF). In a response to the rebuttal, Reydam's argues that the critics, including major Lancaster - assistant to General Dallaire during the genocide - also distinguish themselves as mouthpieces of the RPF.

Arguments

At first glance the controversy resembles what we are accustomed to in the polarized debate about Rwanda. But looking closer, this case is not a matter of opinion. Most primary school students would probably spot the flaws in the criticized paper as easy as the critics, as Reydam's arguments take these forms:

- X (AR) says the same thing as Y (RPF). X says it six weeks before Y does. Conclusion: X is echoing Y.
- X interviews five people a day. P achieves only a fraction of that: forty-four in nine days. Conclusion: X must have been helped by Y.
- X employs Q some time after the alleged help from Y. Conclusion: Q has witnessed Y's help.

These simple examples have already been corrected for other irregularities such as manipulated data. We will scrutinize those details in the rest of this article. Our own analysis of the information in Reydam's paper reveals more than 200 substantive errors. His suggestion that the critics are motivated by political preferences can't, even if it were true, conceal this fact.

Equally questionable is the failing fact checking procedure of the journal. Reydam's response in the current edition of HRQ contains the same errors and logical fallacies as his 2016 paper. Apparently those elements are not recognized as problematic by the reviewers and editors of the journal. Is this the result of a colossal blind spot or is there more to this story?

'Too big'

The controversial paper, titled *'NGO Justice: African Rights as Pseudo-Prosecutor of the Rwandan Genocide'*, was published in August 2016. The main focus of the paper is an analysis of *'Death, Despair and Defiance'*, an AR-report about the genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda.

'Death, Despair and Defiance' consists to a large extent of survivor's statements recorded by AR in hospitals and refugee camps in Rwanda in May and June 1994. Although this seems fairly

straightforward, Reydam's is very sceptical. With its 742 pages the report is thicker than usual, yet it was published on 29 September, just over three months after AR had completed their field research.

In Reydam's opinion there can be only one explanation for the swift release of the report: AR must have received help from the RPF. In return the rebels would have used the report for propaganda purposes such as accusing senior Hutu officers of playing a key role in the genocide.

Creating a theory based on suspicions is easy. The real work starts with the gathering of objective information and the testing of assumptions. Thinking and knowing can be worlds apart. Was the genocide report really that exceptional, for instance?

"Rakiya would have no difficulty in doing 14-16 hours of interviewing per day", former AR director Alex de Waal says about his colleague Rakiya Omaar. "If you look at our AR report on the Nuba Mountains of 1995, the entire report of several hundred pages, based on hundreds of interviews, was written in four weeks. Were we also stooges of the [rebel movement] SPLA?"

Sources that support Reydam's theory appear to be scarce. *NGO Justice* mentions four Rwandan informants but when asked, only one of them, Theogene Rudasingwa, stands by his story. Rudasingwa is a former secretary general of the RPF who fled Rwanda in 2004 and is now leading an opposition group in exile.

Rudasingwa claims he recruited Omaar on 26 April 1994 when they were both in Nairobi, Kenya. He then allegedly put her into contact with RPF officers. He does not provide any details to support this story, however, let alone information that can be checked. He leaves it up to Reydam's to fill in the blanks.

Verification

Omaar's version of events, on the other hand, is verifiable. Many genocide survivors she has interviewed in 1994 can still be consulted. The same goes for journalists and representatives of other NGOs who have met her in the field. The ones we approached largely confirm her side of the story.

Reydam's tends to cling to his initial assumptions, however. He started out believing that Omaar did all or most of her research at the RPF headquarters in Mulindi near the Ugandan border. In his correspondence with Omaar he questions her about this, asking if it is true that she had stayed in Mulindi from May 1994 until late June. Omaar answers negative.

"It is correct that I drove with [a Reuters crew] from Kampala to Mulindi," Omaar writes to Reydam's, "but I didn't stay in Mulindi till June." She then informs him about the regions she visited afterwards, information that corresponds to dates and locations mentioned in the footnotes of *'Death, Despair and Defiance'*.

Yet the assumption that Omaar spent more time than necessary in the RPF stronghold is the cornerstone of Reydam's theory. He can't drop that idea. Instead of rejecting the assumption, he comes up with an alternative version. He now claims that Omaar returned to Mulindi at the end of June. There's no source to back this up. Omaar denies it.

So the central argument of *NGO Justice* looks like this: X visits Y. X does not linger but moves on to other places. Conclusion: X visits Y twice and together they write a fat report.

In his response to the rebuttal in *HRQ*, Reydams repeats this argument as if it were an established, undeniable fact. For evidence he uses Omaar's answer to whether she had stayed in Mulindi till June. The question is left out, in order to create the impression that her answer was a spontaneous and ambiguous statement. She contradicts herself, Reydams concludes.

'Red flags'

The absence of concrete evidence to support his assumptions compels Reydams to resort to alternative methods. He draws up a list of suspicious patterns, 'red flags' as he calls them, to show that AR was not an independent NGO but a front organisation for the RPF. One category 'red flags' suggests that AR echoed the views of the RPF.

NGO Justice lists five 'suspicious' statements by the RPF that sound very similar to what AR was publishing. However, equally similar statements - that the genocide was planned in advance, for example - were published by Human Rights Watch and scholars, sometimes much earlier. This category also contains the first of the three examples of errors from the beginning of this article.

In *NGO Justice* Reydams points at criticism directed at David Rawson, the then United States Ambassador to Rwanda. Rawson was blamed for refusing to use the term 'genocide', even after the facts had become common knowledge. AR's criticism against Rawson simply echoed that of the RPF, Reydams argues.

His evidence is a *New York Times* article of 8 november 1994, containing an RPF-statement about Rawson. Reydams compares this to '*Death, Despair and Defiance*', which was published six weeks earlier. This chronology suggests that, if a causal relationship exists, the RPF echoed the AR-report, not the other way around.

In terms of logic this mistake is called an '*ante hoc ergo propter hoc*'-fallacy: 'before this, therefore because of this'. In his book '*Writing Africa*', John Edward Philips qualifies this fallacy as "so absurd as to be unimaginable". But Reydams rationalizes the error by claiming that AR got their information from the RPF anyway.

"There is no reason why Omaar or de Waal would have known about Rawson's diplomacy, unless the RPF told them," Reydams writes in *NGO Justice*.

The reason, however, is documented in two footnotes of '*Death, Despair and Defiance*': a *New York Times* article of 10 June 1994. This source contains the views of American experts, not of the RPF. It's hard to understand how Reydams, who claims to have studied the footnotes, could have missed this reference.

Adding and subtracting

Other 'red flags' listed in *NGO Justice*: Rakiya Omaar travelled with an RPF escort; she travelled without an RPF escort; she travelled too much; she conducted too many interviews; she collected too many details; and so on.

For comparison, Reydams uses a report of the British NGO *Physicians for Human Rights UK* (PHR). Dr Peter Hall, the author of the PHR report, and his colleague Andrew Carney, spent 12 days researching in Rwanda in July 1994. The details of their research, as presented in *NGO Justice*, form the second of our three examples.

Reydams states that Hall and Carney collected twenty interviews and had brief chats with children in a hospital. This is an average of about two interviews a day. AR did five interviews a day, he notes, a huge difference. AR must therefore have received help from the RPF.

But in reality the PHR report counts 45 interviews. Why Reydams has cut that number in half is not clear, but in a footnote he suggests that Hall confirmed his information. To us the doctor tells something very different.

“I have looked at the report (which I wrote)”, Hall comments in an email message. “You are almost right in saying there were 45 interviews. There were 44 as the quotes from Father Modeste Mungwarareba with which I peppered the report were ones I found on the internet after I returned (because I thought them so apt)”.

The PHR report shows that Hall and Carney did a lot more besides interviewing 44 people. Three out of the twelve days they spent doing a questionnaire with 248 respondents in two hospitals, a fact omitted by Reydams. In the remaining nine days the doctors reached the same interviewing average as AR.

Hall and Carney also debunk the other red flags. They covered the same ground as Omaar, but in a much narrower timeframe, and they had no trouble obtaining detailed information. They got hold of the ID card of an Interahamwe leader, for example, and received help from Jean-Baptiste Kayigamba, a local journalist and human rights activist, whom they had met during their interviews.

Even Omaar’s travelling with and without an RPF escort turns out to be less suspicious than Reydams imagines. Hall and his colleague got an RPF escort in the Kigali area, but not in the rest of the country.

Anonymous informant

The rest of *NGO Justice* continues along the same lines. Reydams quotes an anonymous former AR employee claiming that the RPF had pre-selected the genocide survivors. Omaar then interviewed them through an RPF interpreter, according to the quote. This would suggest that the RPF controlled the information that ended up in the report.

Fortunately we have been in touch with this informant since well before we had heard of Reydams and his research, which makes it easy to check these facts. To us the informant explains that he wouldn’t be able to comment on Omaar’s work in 1994 as he didn’t get involved with AR until 1995. He denies any RPF involvement with the research while he was there.

"After reading his article, I was shocked to realise that he tried to give the impression that it was the RPF that identified the people for interview and that they shaped their accounts to fit with [their] version of the facts", he says.

Reydams uses the informant again to support an accusation of embezzlement in 1998. That year the European Union (EU) earmarked a grant of ECU 464.000 to finance an AR project. But, according to *NGO Justice*, AR's fiscal report mentioned only a fraction of that amount. He quotes the informant to suggest that Omaar had probably used a large portion of the money for private purposes.

Not surprisingly at this point, the informant did not work for AR in 1998 either. He was employed from 1995-1997 and again five years later, in 2002-2003. Furthermore, the EU informs us that it was, and still is, customary to pay a pre-financing upon the signature of the grant agreement, followed by annual instalments. This explains the fact that the 1998 fiscal report shows a lower amount.

Reydams also suggests that, in 2000, 'auditors' spent a week in Kigali looking in vain for evidence of the AR-project. But according to the report of that mission, a team of two researchers evaluated projects of several organizations... "to assess the performance and future options". The AR project was not included in the assessment because of "lack of information" in the EU archives. The AR office was not even visited. There is no mention of funds gone missing.

It would have been appropriate to ask Omaar to comment on the EU grant before taking the step to publish rumours in a prominent journal. But neither Reydams nor the editors of HRQ have attempted to do so.

Ethical standards

As noted at the beginning of this article, *NGO Justice* contains several hundred errors, 231 to be precise. In Reydams' response to the rebuttal, several more are added. It's impossible to discuss the whole list in this article, but the contribution of a renowned American scholar deserves a reference.

"Rwandan friends told me that the RPF basically handed her interviews already written up", Timothy Longman is quoted saying in *NGO Justice*. Besides this rumor, he also accuses AR of having systematically attacked critics of the RPF such as André Sibomana, a well-known journalist.

But when asked, Longman can't provide a source for the rumor which was spread, according to our information, by Hutu-Power propagandists a few months after the publication of '*Death, Despair and Defiance*'. André Sibomana is not mentioned in any of AR's publications. Unfortunately, Longman does not respond well to the contradictions and refuses to answer our questions.

The communications with other (former) professors who are mentioned in *NGO Justice* is similarly unfruitful. For one of them, the animosity directed at AR appears to stem from a decades old misunderstanding. A couple of years after the genocide the electronic newsletter of AR suddenly stopped arriving. The professor took this as a retaliation for criticizing the RPF.

According to Alex de Waal, who was responsible for the newsletter at the time, it was more likely the result of a technical glitch. "At the time, we were working with an outdated software package that continuously malfunctioned," he says. He doesn't remember receiving any complaints.

Some other influential academics, such as Filip Reijntjens, are equally resentful about Omaar and De Waal, a sentiment that translates into an unconditional support for Reydams' publications. Ethics and rules of conduct are secondary to the character assassinations that feature in those papers. The collateral damage does not concern these scholars, an attitude the victims find incomprehensible.

"Former members of African Rights were willing to contribute to critical thinking about the organisation and what we might learn from its experiences," says Rachel Ibreck, herself a former AR employee. But according to Ibreck, Reydam's showed no interest in those aspects.

"I also find it unacceptable that in his attempt to discredit Death, Despair and Defiance and subsequent publications, he also gave no consideration whatsoever to the thousands of survivors who had the courage to recount their experiences," Ibreck continues. "Reydams should apologise for any potential hurt caused by his irresponsible approach."

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