

# Transforming Rwanda: Challenges on the Road to Reconstruction

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**Renowned Rwandan author and researcher Jean-Paul Kimonyo has written extensively about the history of Rwanda. In his latest book, *Transforming Rwanda: Challenges on the Road to Reconstruction* he pens a detailed account of the country's journey over the last few decades. Below is an excerpt.**

## The Roots of Change

On 26 July 1986, President Juvénal Habyarimana's regime made a mistake that would lead to its fall a few years later. On that day, it signed a policy document entitled "The MRND Central Committee's Position on the Issue of Rwandan Refugees."

Arguing that Rwanda was overpopulated, the National Revolutionary Movement for Development (MRND) denied refugees a collective right of return. It promised to consider only individual requests from those having their own means of support once back inside the country.

The MRND Central Committee's "humanitarian" stance on the "issue of Rwandan refugees" favored their permanent settlement in their host country and urged them to acquire citizen-

ship. This official and public denial of the right of collective return simply recognized a de facto situation and caused great consternation among politicized groups of refugees.

It served as a rallying cry for the growing call to revive political awareness. By announcing its position so starkly after a long period of silence, the Habyarimana regime was in a way reengaging in dialogue with the Tutsi exiles; but this time it was essentially dealing with members of a second generation of refugees who were either born or grew up in exile and whose prospects of integration were melting away in each of the main countries of asylum.

It was not by chance that the Habyarimana regime made its position on refugees public at that particular time. The Kigali government was attempting to subvert a broad movement of cultural and political mobilization within the refugee communities that had begun in the early 1980s.

The victory of Yoweri Museveni's National Resistance Movement (NRM)—six months before the publication of the MRND's policy document—in which several thousand Rwandan combatants took part, did not bode well for the Habyarimana

regime.

For some onlookers, the mobilization of the refugee community, combined with the entry into Kampala of thousands of armed Rwandan refugees and domestic developments inside Rwanda, seemed to announce that dramatic changes were on the way.

In the summer of 1988 at the University of Dakar, the author provoked some of his friends, fellow Rwandan refugees, inviting them to meet at the Hotel Mille Collines in Kigali on 15 August 1995. The magnitude of these future changes were to deeply transform the history of the African Great Lakes region, for better or for worse.

Pinpointing the origins of the changes for which the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) was a central driving force is vital to understanding its later evolution and for any attempt to assess it.

A number of scholars have written about the origins of the RPF, but the most detailed study is by three authors, Paul Rutayisire, Privat Rutazibwa and Augustin Gatera, close to the movement who focused on its internal history rather than on the circumstances of its origin.

Others have overascribed the origins of the RPF exclusively to Rwandan refugees in Uganda and their setbacks within the National Resistance Army (NRA) in the late 1980s, while ignoring the broader historical, cultural, and social context of the political and security crisis with which all Rwandan refugees were collectively confronted from the start of the 1980s.

Mahmood Mamdani sees the RPF in essence as the offloading onto Rwanda of the first serious political crisis within Museveni's NRM, which faced the problem of what to do with

4,000 combatants of Rwandan origin who had contributed substantially to his military success.

Others present the RPF as a group of armed Tutsi refugees, thirsting for power and frustrated after their victory in Uganda, who decided to try their luck at taking Rwanda by force, provoking, as a consequence, the genocide of Tutsis living inside the country.

These attempts to explain the return of Rwandan refugees to Rwanda in terms of a foreign-born army led by an ethnic phalanx are hard to reconcile with the extensive political and human resources the RPF needed if it were to defeat the Rwandan army, which was strongly supported by France, a middle-ranking global power.

Furthermore, those explanations are also fairly incompatible in general with the sheer dimensions of the process of postgenocide reconstruction, no matter which standards of evaluation are used, unless the reconstruction of the country is viewed, wrongly, as is often the case, as the fruit of a radical break in the movement's nature caused by the outbreak of genocide and the need to deal with it.

The following study of the circumstances in which the RPF was created suggests that its response to the formidable challenge of the genocide was dictated by the political identity of a movement formed over the course of forty years of history, a history of defeat in an anti-colonial struggle accompanied by large-scale ethnic violence, the trauma of exile, and thirty-five frustrating years of refugee life.

## The Cultural Dimensions of Rwandan National Identity

Despite the diverse conditions the 1959 refugees lived through during their thirty-five years of exile following the 1959 revolution, a central cultural thread driven by strong national feelings marked their lives until their return to Rwanda.

On 5 October 1986, on the Ruhengeri campus of the National University of Rwanda, Emanuel Ntezimana, dean of the History Department, opened the academic year with an inaugural lecture entitled “National History, Culture, and Consciousness : The Case of Rwanda from its Origins to 1900.”

His words shed a clear light, allowing us to appreciate the importance of cultural identity driving the movement among 1959 refugees to return to Rwanda.

Ntezimana’s presentation describes the development of a Rwandan national consciousness over the long term. He points out that language and culture preceded the emergence of a national consciousness in Rwanda and formed its most resilient substratum.

He makes a distinction between an apolitical cultural substratum, shared by all the clans living within the contours of present-day Rwanda from the seventeenth century, and a national consciousness steeped in political history.

According to Ntezimana, this political history was maintained by lineage groups and drawn from all so-called ethnicities, even if the Tutsi lineages were the most deeply implicated.

This historical consciousness centered on the monarchy and was by nature prone to hyperbole, propagating an exalted image of a Rwandan “people-

nation” and its heroes. Ntezimana explains the resilience of this awareness of a Rwandan “people-nation” by the interaction of these two levels of culture.

According to Ntezimana, ever since the sixteenth century and up to the eve of colonization at the end of the nineteenth century, in Rwanda, key political and military victories benefited from this cultural dimension.

This explains why the country had never given up even after the worst military defeats, during the two occupations by the Abanyoro, and during the armed raids by Nsibura . . . in particular. The worst political crises, primarily crises of succession . . . , were overcome mainly because of cultural factors.

Ntezimana goes on to explain that, in the primary role played by historical memory in producing the political culture of ancestral Rwandans, historical truth was not important. It was enough that Rwandans believed in that memory and because of that, they were carried along by its exalted representation of the country’s history.

Apart from his somewhat opaque language, Ntezimana’s explanations mentioning a “fanatical nationalism” or an “almost inevitable patriotism.” help us gain an understanding of today’s dynamics. Ntezimana explains that in precolonial Rwanda, cultural factors and overworked historical memory engendered history.

That is to say, political and military events drove those involved to surpass themselves in attempting to achieve an exalted self-image that reflected their historical consciousness.

This glorified vision of Rwanda, of its centrality and of the moral obligation of all Rwandans to sacrifice them-

selves for the motherland in the hour of need, was stressed in traditional historical tales.

These ideas entered the language through proverbs and other sayings like “God spends the day elsewhere, but passes the night in Rwanda”; “Rwanda attacks and is not attacked”; “When you refuse to spill blood for your country, dogs will lap it up.”

Some of these elements are found in 2019 in a national civic education program called *Itorero*. There was also an element of transcendence in the relationship of early Rwandans to their country, which was ruled by a sacred monarchy.

In conclusion, Ntezimana places his thoughts in the time frame in which he was speaking, namely, the mid-1980s. The historian asks that the interruptions caused by colonization and the 1959 revolution be placed within a larger context and, in so doing, that closer attention be paid to Rwanda’s deep historical continuities.

This approach might seem strange, in as much as the perception of historical rupture produced by government propaganda in its evocation of the 1959 revolution went deep.

And yet, it allowed this eminent historian, whose entire career was spent under the Habyarimana regime, to somehow foresee, as early as 1986, the banished refugees’ attempt to reconnect with the history of their country.

### **Different but Converging Refugees Situations**

During their thirty years in exile, the Rwandan refugees proved their resilience and capacity to adapt, and a

small minority even achieved professional success and material comforts.

The host populations and the Rwandan government, impressed by and envious of this success, often tended to generalize this reputation for success by extending it to all the refugees. However, the great majority of refugees lived in poverty in the camps or in slums throughout the region.

After having abandoned their activist leaders’ plans to return to Rwanda by force in the 1960s, the Rwandan refugees focused on their material survival and integration into host countries. In order to do so, they demonstrated a spirit of adaptation, working in the fields while investing in their children’s education to free them from that.

They had to humble themselves to integrate into the host populations and open up to their cultures, and some went so far as adopting their hosts’ culture almost completely.

Conversely, helped by their geographical concentrations and their need for mutual solidarity in order to survive, for a long time they preserved their faith in the value of their cultural identity despite the reality of the situation.

Following the measures allowing for informal integration, such as were granted to the refugees in the easy-going years of the 1970s, there followed an increasingly rigid and even violent closing down of available options during the 1980s in Uganda, Burundi, and Zaire, three of the main countries hosting Rwandan refugees.

The economic crisis and population growth placing more pressure on land were among the main reasons.

But the absence of white-collar employment opportunities was another factor that increased tensions. In 1990,

researchers predicted on the basis of available data that the phenomenon of rejection of former refugees would accelerate and would create serious problems in the African Great Lakes region.

Even Tanzania, a country long regarded as a model for the integration of refugees, got caught up in these developments in the 2000s.

In the case of the Rwandan refugees, their rejection by the host populations was exacerbated by the visible ambition and success of some refugees, for example in Zaire under Mobutu or in Uganda after the NRA victory.

In Burundi, with its limited resources and opportunities, the reintegration of Burundian Hutu elites—many of whom had lived in Rwanda—into the country's political and social life was hardly compatible with the continued occupation of a small part of this space by the Rwandan refugees, who were Tutsis to boot.

Lastly, quite apart from their ambitions and their enduring attachment to their national identity, their relatively large numbers added obstacles to their integration.

After more than two decades of residence in their host countries, the number of Rwandan refugees had more than doubled, and their major investment in education resulted in a relatively high number of well-educated young people at a time when the opportunities available to them were decreasing.

The particular historical conditions in Uganda during the second half of

the 1980s meant that, for a number of Rwandan refugees, the matter of integration—official this time—was inescapable and creating tensions with the host community.

For the second-generation refugees born or growing up in Burundi, where their token integration had been tolerated by the government circumstantially, the feeling of a significant *impasse* spread.

In Zaire, the long-standing refugee community had sought to identify with the Banyarwanda living there and became resigned to sharing the complex situation of this group and to follow the slow downward decline of the rest of Zairean society.

From the mid-1980s, with the emergence of a second generation growing up as refugees, these pressures increased to the point that they had to begin searching for their own lasting solution to their situation. The pressures were expressed in different ways but were convergent in each of the main refugee-hosting countries.

They prompted a lively political awakening among some politically active refugees in Ugandan, Burundi, and Kenya as well as in the small diasporas elsewhere in Africa, in Europe, and in North America. Apart from these initial scattered groups of militants, who became the first RPF recruits, the idea of a collective return to Rwanda was still considered by many a mere *chimera*.

[The book is available at most bookstores in Kigali]