

Diaspora as anti-politics: the case of Rwanda

By William Jones

Rwandans – often Tutsi – consider themselves as... I wouldn't say 'the African Jews', but they believe that their suffering is equal to that of Jews – that's why Rwandans will tell you about 'the Rwandan diaspora'. Others say 'Me? I'm not part of the diaspora'. This is what they'll tell you: 'We are Rwandan refugees' (Faustin Twagiramungu, Prime Minister of Rwanda 1994–5).¹

Who a Rwandan is has always been a deeply tortured question. During the genocide of 1994, Tutsi bodies were dumped in rivers that would 'carry them *back* to Egypt'. This was not a completely isolated incident, but a particularly extreme and grotesque instance of the ways in which political contestation in Rwanda revolves around questions of who is, and is not, a legitimate member of the political community. This is both a dispute as to who may legitimately claim Rwandan identity, and about what else, politically and socially, follows from that claim.

These debates take on new forms for those self-identified Rwandans (Hutu, Tutsi, or Twa) who have, for one reason or another, left Rwanda, where a fractured form of Rwanda's polarised political scene reproduces itself. In our research (Betts and Jones forthcoming) we interviewed Rwandan refugees in Congo; exiled journalists in Uganda; in South Africa, former military officers now leading ostensibly civilian opposition political parties; in France and Belgium, remembrance organisations dedicated to overturning the dominant historical account of the 1994 genocide, alongside youth groups which want to avoid mentioning it as much as possible. What surprised us

was how resistant many of our informants were to the label 'diaspora', and their reasons for being so. A frequently heard refrain was 'I'm not in the diaspora, I'm a refugee'. Slightly less common was the (usually hinted) suggestion that one could not be a member of the diaspora if one was not a supporter of the Rwandan Patriotic Front, or middle-class, or Hutu.

This is in stark contrast to how the Rwandan government itself deploys the term. The last ten years have seen a flurry of government-initiated activity directed at expanding and formalising the Rwandan state's relationship with 'its' diaspora. There is now a well-funded Diaspora Directorate operating out of Kigali, which – in collaboration with embassies and High Commissions across the globe – runs a raft of remembrance activities, cultural days, festivals, and fundraisers, promotes diasporic banking, remittances, and return trips to experience the new Rwanda. 'The' diaspora, rhetorically framed as 'Rwanda's Sixth Province', is seen as an all-inclusive, unthreatening, apolitical label which applies to all and any Rwandans abroad. Its discursive content, if any, is merely a positive affirmation of Rwandan culture, and an aspiration towards ever-greater development.

Given the innocuousness of this, it might seem surprising that so many Rwandans abroad are vehement in their rejection of the diasporic label. However, this misses what is controversial in the seemingly bland advocacy of peace, unity, and prosperity. The language or 'stance' of diaspora, in this instance, is anti-political. The associational lives of diasporic Rwandans function to promote a specific, politically-loaded understanding of Rwanda's current condition, its history, and its relationship to its extra-territorial nationals. By anti-political (Ferguson 1990), I mean that it is a bureaucratic discourse of subjectification (i.e. it constructs Rwandans as subjects in particular ways) which shut down certain discussions, promote others, and depoliticise the Rwandan state, its social conflicts with exiled Rwandans, and its policies. Unlike the DevSpeak of the planners of Lesotho, however, depoliticisation here functions through an endless discourse of amity, peace, happiness, (apolitical) developmentalism, and patriotic unity. The preponderance of the activities of the new diaspora is not perhaps the more obviously political protest activity or overt legal activism. That is the exception,

rather than the rule. The calendar of diasporic activity is stuffed, but with culture days, harvest festivals, development expos, and sports tournaments. The ‘model diasporan’ is not one that spends much time protesting outside embassies, but one that teaches their children Kinyarwanda, remits, attends the events put on by the embassy, and reinforces the normality of Rwanda.

None of this is necessarily insincere on the part of its participants, but it is fair to ask what political effects this has. The obvious answer is the promotion of a relentless banality: Rwanda as a ‘normal’ country, with a ‘normal’ relationship with its diaspora, who are themselves entirely happy with the current drift of the Rwandan state and its policies. The effect of this for the Western parliamentarians and journalists that witness this is clear: it grounds the claim that Rwanda is the sort of place one need not worry about. Worse still for the opponents of the regime, it makes them look hysterical.

There is a further apolitical aspect: discourse about Rwanda is transposed to a conversation about ‘development’. The category here is as amorphous as anywhere else, stretching to include bank liberalisation (Orozco 2009), the reconstruction of Kigali as an African Brasilia (Goodfellow and Smith 2013), and the destruction of the homes of ordinary rural Rwandans deemed insufficiently ‘modern’ (Newbury 2011).² The elasticity of development is not accidental: it shifts with the priorities of the state. Simultaneously, it presents its object and techniques not as political, or the subject of reasonable contestation, but as uncontroversial products of technocratic knowledge. Finally, in so doing, it implicitly reinforces the authority of the state, in taking it to be the authoritative voice on what the content of development might be.

In this context, then, the hostility towards the term diaspora makes more sense. What is being rejected, along with diasporic identity, is the current Rwandan state, and it is therefore those communities which feel most excluded from Rwanda’s present dispensation that are the most unreceptive. However, this doesn’t mean that ‘diaspora’ could be refashioned as a more inclusive identity capable of encompassing the factionalised networks of Rwandans abroad, as it is precisely that bland discourse of inclusion to which many object. □

Endnotes

1. Author interview, 8 November 2013, via skype.
2. For more on the developmental orientation of the Rwandan state in general, see Jones et al. (2013).

References

- Betts, A and Jones, W. (forthcoming) *The Nation Outside the State: Transnational Political Mobilisation in the African Diaspora*.
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