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# "I SPEAK TO THOSE WHO UNDERSTAND": HOW RTLM FUELED GENOCIDE IN RWANDA

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“I SPEAK TO THOSE WHO UNDERSTAND”<sup>1</sup>:  
HOW RTLM FUELED GENOCIDE IN RWANDA

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HIST-108R: Topics in World History: Research  
November 4, 2023

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<sup>1</sup> Évariste Ntakirutimana and Marie-Claire Uwamariya, “Song as a propaganda tool in the genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda,” *Propaganda and International Criminal Law* (Routledge: 2008), 237-61, 240. “This is an invitation to meet the singer in a place unknown, a place where the song is delivered to his audience. Bikindi does not speak to the ‘bad Hutu’ who would not understand but speaks to an ‘enlightened’ Hutu who recognizes what he sees.”

**Introduction: “Don’t pretend that you aren’t involved anymore.”<sup>2</sup>**

The Rwandan Genocide against the Tutsi, Twa, and Hutu moderates of 1994 is one of the most egregious and horrifying instantiations of mass atrocity since Nazi Germany. Despite solemn vows from the mouth of the United Nations to “never again” countenance the terror of genocide in the wake of the Holocaust, the international community largely stood apart, noncommittal and ineffectual, as 800,000 people or more were hunted, tortured, raped, and murdered by a war-torn Hutu populace mobilized into genocidal militias called *interahamwe* – a Kinyarwanda word meaning “those who fight together”.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, those Hutu who participated in the genocide saw themselves as Rwanda’s defenders against a race of foreign invaders, a separate and altogether lesser subspecies of human stereotyped by ineptitude, duplicity, and

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<sup>2</sup> *We Survived Genocide in Rwanda*. Edited by Wendy Whitworth (Newark: Quill Press, 2006), 29. This source is an anthology of survivor accounts compiled and translated by the Aegis Trust’s Kigali Memorial Center from accounts preserved in the Memorial Center’s Genocide Archive of Rwanda. Mindful of the need to humanize people who have been dehumanized by the genocidal process, and in keeping with an ethical imperative to amplify voices which have endured genocide in the service of mass atrocity crimes education and prevention, I have chosen to signpost this article with relevant quotes from the survivor stories found within this book. These signposts are my humble and respectful attempt to humanize the anesthetic statistics which always accompany mass atrocity. The words which here signal the introduction are a message directed explicitly at the international community from a young man named Emmanuel Gasana, who was fifteen years old during the genocide of 1994. Gasana fled with his mother, who ran so hard and long to keep her son safe from the bloodshed that, eventually, Gasana recalls, “...in the cold, in the rain; she was starving and ill and had no treatment... She got weaker and weaker until dogs started coming around her, pulling her clothes till they ate her... That’s how she died.” Gasana worked as a guide at the Kigali Memorial Center at the time of the anthology’s compilation. This article is dedicated to Emmanuel Gasana’s mother, who he names only as “Mum”. For clarification on why it is important to humanize mass atrocity statistics by highlighting individual lives, see Paul Slovic, “‘If I Look at the Mass I Will Never Act’: Psychic Numbing and Genocide.” *Judgment and Decision Making* 2, no. 2 (2007): 79–95.

<sup>3</sup> Gregory H. Stanton, “Could the Rwandan Genocide have been prevented?” *Journal of Genocide Research* 6, no. 6 (June 2004): 211-28, 211-12. Also see Samantha Power, *A Problem from Hell: America and the Age of Genocide* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 108.

depravity — therefore deserving of any brutality the *genocidaires* could imagine. This belief derived from a racial hierarchy imported into and inflicted upon Rwanda by German and Belgian colonizers. The regime which perpetrated the genocide used a popular radio station to exploit this — and other fault lines in Rwandan society — with terrifying efficacy.

This station, *Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines* (Radio for the Liberation of the Thousand Hills, RTLM), was the primary vessel of communication between the genocidal Hutu Power regime and the populace of Rwanda. The genocidal government represented a merger of two political parties, the Rightwing *Mouvement révolutionnaire national pour le développement* (MRND) and the Far-Right *Coalition pour la Défense de la République* (CDR). Since the interim government was typified by Hutu Power ideology regardless of party affiliations, I have chosen to refer to it as the Hutu Power government/regime in this article. Employing a charismatic cast of pundits and a lively mix of popular music, RTLM successfully primed Rwandan society to explode into a gestalt mass atrocity event.<sup>4</sup> While a comprehensive accounting of the intricacies of the genocide’s myriad “justifications” is quite beyond the scope of this article, a study of RTLM’s role within the genocidal process as a whole invites a narrowed focus on the major topics of conversation and song which formed the aural pillars of the station’s typical broadcast day. There exists no single key to explaining RTLM’s consummate

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<sup>4</sup>Jason McCoy, “Making Violence Ordinary: Radio, Music, and the Rwandan Genocide,” *African Music* 8, no. 3 (2009): 85-96. McCoy’s article is a deep examination of the cultural soundscape which RTLM wove in the months leading up to the genocide using a “Westernized” vernacular formula of popular music, charismatic personalities, and intimate conversation. McCoy argues RTLM effectively transformed Rwanda’s cultural *zeitgeist* into a skein before which the genocide could be interactively performed in tandem by RTLM and its listeners with a format which “might be compared to a combination of Howard Stern, Rush Limbaugh and KISS FM” (p. 88).

success in its broad incitement of genocide. Rather, “Radio Machete” worked because it struck strategically at four of Rwanda’s major societal divides. The first of these divides was a racial hierarchy which disadvantaged ethnic Tutsis. Second, genderized hatred of Tutsi women. Third, economic collapse and impending famine caused by drought and the plummeting price of coffee (Rwanda’s primary cash crop) on the global market. And fourth, waves of civil war which had tortured the Thousand Hills since 1959.

The historical realities that set the stage for the Rwandan Genocide are extremely complex, and RTLM cannot be understood without some contextualization. Before examining the above arguments, it is worth summarizing the processes that, together, set the stage for RTLM’s performance of mass atrocity. The first part of this article serves that purpose, establishing context for the arguments examined in each subsequent part.

Rwanda was settled by the people who are now called the Hutu and the Tutsi over a span of two millennia. Fecund, rich with rain-soaked soil for cultivation and pastureland for livestock, the Thousand Hills hosted a booming population and, by the 18<sup>th</sup> century, a complex and militaristic state wherein power was measured in subjects and wealth measured in cattle. The word “Tutsi”, once used as status descriptor for those flush with cattle wealth, came to denote and stratify the elites, and the word “Hutu”, subordinates. Over time, a third, smaller group, the Twa, gradually migrated out from their forest homes and partially integrated within this system.

At the Berlin Conference of 1885, European powers, who knew practically nothing about Rwanda or its people, claimed the tiny African state as a German colony. *De facto* colonization of the Thousand Hills under indirect German rule began in 1894, exactly one

century before the genocide. Following Germany's defeat in the Great War, Belgium took the reins of colonial power. It was in the shadow of Belgian cruelty that cohesion among the Hutu group had its genesis, and in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the ideology of "Hutu Power", a vision of a "pure" Hutu ethnostate, first appeared in northern Rwanda.<sup>5</sup>

In 1933, Belgian colonizers institutionalized a racial hierarchy which positioned the Tutsi minority, who were thought to tend toward lighter skin, taller statures, and more aquiline features, closer to whiteness. Proximity to whiteness bestowed a reified social status which advantaged them over the Hutu and the Twa.<sup>6</sup> Tutsi women were considered by the Europeans to be particularly beautiful, a notion which presaged terror for those women and girls.<sup>7</sup>

Missionaries had established a Biblical pseudohistory which identified the Tutsi as the lost tribe of Ham from Ethiopia, a myth eventually debunked but not before it planted a seed of genocide against the very people it sought to advantage and an age of oppression for those it sought to disadvantage.<sup>8</sup> All Rwandans were issued and required to carry identification cards which stated their ethnic identity as assumed by European eyes, a symbolization which bore a death omen for hundreds of thousands of Rwandans. Within this tortured structure, Hutu suffering was acute and disproportionate.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Linda Melvern, *A People Betrayed: The Role of the West in Rwanda's Genocide*, (New York: Zed Books, 2009), 14.

<sup>6</sup>Alison Desforges, "Leave None to Tell the Story: Genocide in Rwanda," *Human Rights Watch*, March 1999, 34.

<sup>7</sup>See generally Binaifer Nowrojee, "Shattered Lives: Sexual Violence in the Rwandan Genocide", *Human Rights Watch*, September 1996.

<sup>8</sup>Desforges, "Leave None," 35.

<sup>9</sup>Melvern, *Betrayed*, 13-15.

In 1959, a nationalist Hutu uprising forced longed-for independence from Belgian rule and the brutal expulsion of an estimated 130,000 — mostly Tutsi — refugees into Congo, Burundi, Uganda, and Tanganika. The new government continued to issue racial identity cards but reversed the polarities of oppression which had previously benefited Tutsi elite (and it bears mention that most Tutsi were not ruling elites, but cultivators and pastoralists like their Hutu and Twa neighbors, and just as poor).<sup>10</sup>

In 1962, a small army of about 1,500 exilic Tutsi, calling themselves *Inyenzi* (cockroaches), pushed violently back into the Thousand Hills. This sparked a tug of civil war which lullid and lunged from side to side across the borders, periodically ravaging the Rwandan polity, spinning off reprisal massacres of patriated Tutsi whom Hutu officials conflated with the attacking forces (thereby characterizing mass murder as national defense), and swelling the number of refugees caught in the crisis to about 600,000 — finally culminating in the eventual invasion by the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) in 1990 and the genocide itself in 1994.<sup>11</sup>

By 1973, the ruling Parmehutu party was destabilized and reeling at the brink of an existential split between north and south when the most senior officer in the *Forces armées rwandaises* (FAR, the national army of Rwanda), General Juvénal Habyarimana, seized power in a coup backed by an intimate cabal of Hutu hard-liners called the *akazu* (little house) comprised of businessmen, academics, powerbrokers from within the family of Madame Habyrimana, and other important men mostly drawn from the new dictator's home region. President Habyarimana

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<sup>10</sup>Melvern, *Betrayed*, 11.

<sup>11</sup>Desforbes, "Leave None," 42.



and his political allies deftly transformed the Rwandan government into a totalitarian monolith. He enjoyed great support from the Catholic clergy, but both “Catholic and Protestant clergy cooperated with officials”, employing the pulpit as a mouthpiece for state propaganda and serving on prefectural councils.<sup>12</sup> Another tool which the ruling party used to communicate its will during this era was Radio Rwanda, the official state (and the only, until RTLM) radio station in Rwanda. Radio Rwanda’s stilted, statist format articulated policy and direction but not entertainment or fun, a trait to which RTLM would later strike a sharp contrast.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, a printed bi-weekly tabloid called *Kangura* (wake up), which disseminated anti-Tutsi invective and notably featured lurid cartoons which degraded and dehumanized Tutsi women for their perceived prurience and weaponization of sex against Hutu men, as well “The Hutu Ten Commandments”, the first three of which commandments explicitly targeted and othered Tutsi women. Both Radio Rwanda and *Kangura* were the brainchildren of Ferdinand Nahimana, a history professor reified by the regime for his pseudo historiography which subverted the Biblical Hamitic legend and used it to recast ethnic Tutsis as an invading force bent on the annihilation of ethnic Hutus.<sup>14</sup>

Within this violent framework, the global price of coffee collapsed in the 1980s, plunging the Thousand Hills, already savaged by colonialism’s malignity and wracked with civil war, into abyssal penury. Amid all of this horror, drought struck the Thousand Hills, and the resultant decrease in food production along with the violent destabilization of war and coffee’s

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<sup>12</sup> Desforges, 39.

<sup>13</sup> Desforges, 58-59

<sup>14</sup> Melvern, *Betrayed*, 81-82.

economic downfall placed Rwanda, as “one of the poorest countries in the world and growing poorer” directly beneath the threat of impending famine, with 800,000 people projected to starve to death without food aid in 1994 — a number and a temporality eerily congruent with the official death toll and timeframe of the genocide.<sup>15</sup>

In October of 1990, the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) attacked Rwanda. Led by Paul Kagame, then-exile but now Rwanda’s sitting president at the time of this writing, the RPF was a cogent militarized force of exilic fighters trained and blooded largely in the Ugandan army and funded by an intricate and clandestine international fundraising effort.<sup>16</sup> They intended to blaze a path for the refugees to return home. By 1993, the RPF had forced Habyarimana’s regime into signing the Arusha Accords, an armistice that would realize that pathway home and force the Hutu Power government to recognize four new political parties, striking something closer to a balance between Hutu and Tutsi political power. However, the *akazu* and the FAR had been laying preparations for the genocide since 1991, incorporating and training the *interahamwe* militias, purchasing and distributing huge caches of machetes and firearms with which to arm those militias, committing unanswered and unpunished trial massacres of ethnic Tutsis and moderate Hutus, and distributing radios to the Hutu populace who were slated for mass implication in the coming atrocity.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Desforges, “Leave None,” 6.

<sup>16</sup> Melvern, *Betrayed*, 27-38.

<sup>17</sup> Desforges, “Leave None,” 97. Working from import license requests from 1993-94, Desforges estimates that shipments from this period included, as part of a larger order of metal goods, farming implements, and hand tools which were likewise distributed for weaponization to the *genocidaires*, approximately 581,000 machetes, roughly one machete for every third adult Hutu male in Rwanda.

In July of 1993, one month before the signing of the Arusha Accords, RTLM began broadcasting from Kigali, founded by businessman Felicien Kabuga with the financial backing of several *akazu* investors as well as Rwandan musical sensation Simon Bikindi, who used the station to promote his music, and history professor Ferdinand Nahimana, whose pseudo historiography represented the backbone RTLM's anti-Tutsi ideology. The vernacular radio station was an immediate success, becoming wildly popular not only among Hutus but also among a significant cross-section of Tutsi as well. RTLM featured a cast of eight irreverent and relatable disc jockeys, some of whom defected or had been fired from Radio Rwanda (one notably, Noel Hatimana, who had been terminated for being drunk on the air at Radio Rwanda and turned on-air drunkenness into a performative schtick at RTLM). Seven of RTLM's DJs broadcast in Kinyarwanda and one in French. RTLM encouraged audience participation from the outset, allowing listeners to call in and add their voices to the discussions of the day, to request the music which had the country dancing and singing on the eve of mass atrocity and throughout the horrifically orgiastic throes of it, or to shout out relatives and friends live on the air. Colloquial interviews, comedy routines, infectious grooves, exploitative and sensationalized journalism, and a casually anti-Arusha, anti-Tutsi atmosphere were the rule on RTLM's broadcasts. RTLM was owned by the same people who owned Radio Rwanda, broadcast at the same frequency as Radio Rwanda, during the times when Radio Rwanda had signed off, yet it was still able to pass itself off as an edgy, rebellious, maverick presence on the airwaves.<sup>18</sup> RTLM presented itself to its audience with charismatic aplomb as, "the first free Radio in Rwanda, sympathetic Radio, your Radio... to assist all Rwandans by giving them their favorite

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<sup>18</sup>McCoy, "Ordinary", 88-89.

news (laughter)...and good music...it is not Radio Rwanda, it is not the official radio station...freedom of speech is the norm at RTLM.”<sup>19</sup>

Then, on April 6<sup>th</sup>, 1994, after almost a year of stalling the implementation of the Arusha Accords, President Habyarimana’s plane was shot down in a rocket attack near Kigali. Both Habyarimana and the Hutu president of Burundi were killed. RTLM accused the RPF, and, by the conflation which had become a standard of Hutu Power propaganda, all Tutsis in Rwanda, of planning and executing the assassination. The RAF and *interahamwe* mobilized within hours of Habyarimana’s death, aided on the airwaves by RTLM’s reading of previously prepared death lists, broadcasting “names, addresses, and license plate numbers of Tutsi and moderate Hutu”.<sup>20</sup> Killings of opposition leaders and peacekeepers in Kigali occurred right away. Within days, the Rwandan Genocide raged in force, spreading across the Thousand Hills.

**Race: “We were like cursed people. They called us children of *Inyenzi*...[t]hose things hurt me so much... [i]f people were free of this ignorance, nobody could convince them to kill someone just because he’s short or tall!”<sup>21</sup>**

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<sup>19</sup> *Audio Transcripts*, Genocide Archive of Rwanda, aired January 17, 1994 on *Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines*.  
[https://genocidearchiverwanda.org.rw/index.php?title=Unictr\\_RtM\\_0155\\_Eng&gsearch=](https://genocidearchiverwanda.org.rw/index.php?title=Unictr_RtM_0155_Eng&gsearch=)

<sup>20</sup> Power, *From Hell*, 343.

<sup>21</sup> *We Survived Genocide in Rwanda*, Whitworth ed., 43. Here, Pierre Kavubi recounts the climate of ethnic tension and simmering racialized violence which dominated his entire life from the time of his birth in 1960, one year into the first Hutu revolution which broke Belgian power over the Thousand Hills. Here, Kavubi laments the trauma wrought on his life through the inherent violence of ethnic divides. According to the pseudoscientific system of racial hierarchy imposed by the Belgians, a major trait which was believed to be discursive to the Tutsi and Hutu ethnic groups was height: Tutsis were thought to be taller than Hutus.

By far the most publicized and broadly cited facet of the Rwandan Genocide, an initial study of the event is almost certain to introduce the racial hierarchy that divided Rwanda's ethnic groups before any other factor. While a focus on ethnic divides is problematic in that it carries with it the risk of simplification, that Enlightenment-style racial hierarchy held a generative effect on violence within Rwanda and existed as an antecedent to the genocide of 1994 is not in question.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, RTLM's use of ethnic invective is so ubiquitous as to become a generalized tonality that characterized all eight of the station's genocidal DJs as well the music they played. As such, interrogation of RTLM requires interrogation of the racial myths that permeated Rwandese society under both colonial and post-colonial rule.

Anti-Tutsi bigotry constructed atop a scaffold of colonial racism was central not only to RTLM, but to the political ideology that birthed it. In his article "Turning Interhamwe: individual and community choices in the Rwandan Genocide," Luke Fletcher elucidates the Hutu Power perspectives "that the Hutu and the Tutsi were racially different groups, that the Tutsis as a group were cunning and untrustworthy, and that the Tutsis were the cause of all the problems in Rwanda at the time."<sup>23</sup> Indeed, such viewpoints had long been pillars of the propagandic organs imagined by Professor Ferdinand Nahimana, Radio Rwanda and *Kangura*, and continued to constitute the weight of his efforts as RTLM head.<sup>24</sup>

It is perhaps ironic that the clear origins of the divide between Tutsi and Hutu, carved

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<sup>22</sup> Luke Fletcher. "Turning interahamwe: individual and community choices in the Rwandan genocide." *Journal of Genocide Research* 9, (March 2007), 25–48.

<sup>23</sup> Fletcher, "Turning Interahamwe", 26.

<sup>24</sup> Desforges, "Leave None", 573.

so deep across millennia in tangles of dynastic legend and hero myth that it cannot be separated from a generalized conceptualization of Rwandese polity, eludes anthropologists and historians. The notion that the Tutsi were a separate race, however, appears to originate in 1859, with English explorer and colonial agent John Hanning Speke's attempt to explain the elevation of Central African civilization beyond what European ignorance deemed achievable by anyone other than whites.<sup>25</sup> In any case, the institutionalization of racialized ideology by Belgian colonizers in 1933 which manifested most infamously in ethnic identification cards, evolved an annihilatory function in the genocide as ethnicity was checked via card at *interahamwe* roadblocks, on randomized street patrols, and during vicious home invasions across the Thousand Hills.

Drawing on and subverting biblical narratives that both Catholic and Protestant missionaries had advanced since the early days of European imposition, hearkening to heroic ideation of a revolutionary past wherein Hutu underdogs rose to overthrow colonial tyranny and a despotic king, RTLM exploited Rwanda's tragically racialized and distorted sense of its own history in practically every moment of its existence, to such an extent that a full catalog of the station's use of ethnically centered vituperation would constitute then considerably expand the length of this writing. The contextual slur, *inyenzi*, was common as mud, used casually and conversationally by all the station's pundits.<sup>26</sup> In his damning article, "Could the Rwandan Genocide have been prevented?" Gregory H. Stanton contextualizes RTLM's pervasive use of verminizing language within the framework of his "Ten Stages of Genocide" model at the third

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<sup>25</sup> Melvern, *Betrayed*, 11-12.

<sup>26</sup> See generally, *Audio Transcripts*. Genocide Archive of Rwanda.  
[https://genocidearchiverwanda.org.rw/index.php?title=Category:Audio\\_Transcripts](https://genocidearchiverwanda.org.rw/index.php?title=Category:Audio_Transcripts)

stage, Dehumanization. “This stage is where the death spiral of genocide begins...[t]he victim group...is called the names of animals or likened to a disease...[giving] ideological justification to the *genocidaires*, who claim they are purifying the society... [and overcoming] the normal human revulsion against murder.”<sup>27</sup> The personalities, shareholders, and thinkers who brought RTLM to horrendous and ravaging life were so much more than aware of this racial divide, they were empowered and informed by its violent consequentiality at every step of the genocidal process. That RTLM leveraged racism and bigotry to effect genocide is evident. How they used it to conflate all Tutsi as an invading force is explored later in the final argument I will put forth to explain how RTLM fueled genocide in Rwanda.

**Gender: “I only half survived. I am still carrying death in me... Others say they escaped from the sword, but the sword is still in my heart; and even in death, I do not believe I will find rest.”<sup>28</sup>**

The Rwandan Genocide can also be characterized as a nightmarish gendercide against Tutsi women and girls. Part of the 1994 targeted mass killings of Tutsi, Twa, and Hutu

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<sup>27</sup> Stanton, “Prevented?”, 214.

<sup>28</sup> *We Survived Genocide in Rwanda*, Whitworth ed., 12. Anne Marie, a Tutsi woman who was 27 years old at the time of the genocide, happily married to construction contractor who dealt in wholesale beer and beans at her side, and mother of two boys, one four-year-old and the other only a baby, lost everything at the hands of *interahamwe* rapists. Her husband was arrested and executed; her baby was smashed against a wall before she was raped. She was betrayed several times by people who had promised her aid, she was imprisoned and raped for six days by an unknown number of men in front of her four-year-old son, and she was infected with HIV. Anne Marie’s experience is not the exception but the rule within the plague of sexual violence, which targeted Tutsi women and girls, and collaterally injured practically the entire female populace in the Thousand Hills.

moderates was a horrific campaign of rape, sexual mutilation, and torture targeting Tutsi women and girls. Often, these women were raped immediately after seeing their homes ransacked and burned, their families hacked or beaten to death, left in the streets or dumped into latrines or shallow graves which the women were forced to dig. Some women were ordered to kill their own children or to engage in incest with a male family member before they were murdered. Many who were not immediately killed after being raped were held in sexual slavery, some through forced “marriages” and other through simple force. *Interahamwe* militias assembled rape gangs tactically composed of men infected with HIV to ensure the slow wasting death of their victims over the course of years.<sup>29</sup> In Rwanda, a Catholic country where forced birth is law, babies conceived within this plague of mass rape are known as *enfants mauvais souvenir* (children of bad memories).<sup>30</sup>

To understand RTLM’s role in promoting epidemic sexual violence against Tutsi women, it is necessary to contextualize the station both within colonial narratives of ethnicity, sex, and power as well as within the framework of the larger propaganda machine which the MRND government operated in the years leading up to the genocide. The Hamitic legend by

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<sup>29</sup> See generally Christopher C. Taylor, “Dialectics of Hate and Desire: Tutsi Women and Hutu Extremism,” *Genocide*, edited by Adam Jones (Los Angeles: Sage) 2008, 283-301. See also *Genocide’s Perpetrator’s Confessions*, Genocide Archive of Rwanda, Masumbuko Nyiringango Nyekongo Zéphilin’s confession, dated August 24, 2005. [https://genocidearchiverwanda.org.rw/index.php?title=Kmc00540/kmc00540\\_vid7.mp4&gsearch=h](https://genocidearchiverwanda.org.rw/index.php?title=Kmc00540/kmc00540_vid7.mp4&gsearch=h) Zéphilin claims to have been a Hutu moderate who participated in several murders to save his own life. He also claims that he rescued a young woman and her two children from his militia unit, who had given the young mother a machete and ordered to kill the children and dump their bodies into a latrine. The woman’s name and fate are unknown, and no witnesses exist to corroborate Zéphilin’s story.

<sup>30</sup> Binaifer Nowrojee. *Shattered Lives: Sexual Violence in the Rwandan Genocide*, Human Rights Watch, 1996.



which Rwandans were miseducated on the history of the Tutsi and the Hutu characterized Tutsi as intellectually and morally superior to the Hutu and held that Tutsi women were more beautiful and desirable than Hutu women. This perspective did not originate entirely with Hamitism, and there is evidence that in pre-colonial times, marriage of a Hutu man to a Tutsi woman was viewed as a symbol of social advancement.<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless, Hamitism propagated this perception of feminine beauty in Tutsi women. When the Hutu revolution achieved independence for Rwanda and repressive inversions for the Hutu and the Tutsi, Tutsi women came to be seen as a corruptive and degenerative influence to which Hutu men were particularly susceptible. Miscegenation between the two groups became increasingly taboo and disadvantageous to Hutu men.<sup>32</sup> The Habyarimana government waged a campaign of public morality which further denigrated Tutsi womanhood, equating it more and more with theft of power and robbery of personal autonomy, as Hutu men were warned that sexual or romantic involvement with Tutsi women was tantamount to slavery. Tutsi women, perhaps even to a greater extent than the old Tutsi monarchs or even the European colonizers, came to be seen as thieves of Hutu pride and personhood. Ferdinand Nahimana's propagandistic print publication, *Kangura*, infamously circulated sexually explicit and dehumanizing images of Tutsi women engaged in taboo (to Rwandese society) sex acts with Belgian soldiers and with the commander of the United Nations Aid Mission in Rwanda's (UNAMIR) peacekeeping force, General Romeo Dallaire, fueling conspiracy theories about Tutsi duplicity applied to curry favor with foreign powers and leveraged against the Hutu, pushing the notion that the forbidden sexual

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<sup>31</sup> Taylor, "Dialectics," 294.

<sup>32</sup> Taylor, "Dialectics," 294-95.

allure of Tutsi women was a key weapon in that political offensive.<sup>33</sup> RTLM carried forth that extant and deep-rooted narrative, warning its listeners that “[The RPF] have with them their *ibizungerez* (Tutsi ladies whose striking beauty can make men lose their heads) to mislead people with their smile full of wickedness and mischief.”<sup>34</sup>

The demonization of Tutsi women within the context of loss of masculine Hutu pride had an insidious linguistic effect. A remarkable trait of the mother tongue of Rwanda, Kinyarwanda, is its ability to enfold multiple layers of meaning into its words and phrases, enabling speakers to effectively communicate many messages within their speech so long as the listener understands the subtle cues offered within the interaction. This features heavily in spoken language, poetry, and song. Within the context of the genderized violence of the Rwandan Genocide, the word *kubohoza* is key to understanding how very language of RTLM’s genocidal agenda had come to be encoded for sexual violence by decades of antecedent propaganda and political violence. In her harrowing report for Human Rights Watch, *Shattered Lives: Sexual Violence and the Rwandan Genocide*, Binaifer Nowrojee writes:

Kubohoza literally means ‘to help liberate.’... The term kubohoza was first used to describe [the] phenomenon [of using force to coerce people to switch political parties]. Later, it was used to describe the taking of land, then resources, and eventually, women. When people engaged in kubohoza, they sometimes covered their faces with chalk, wore banana leaves, attacked at the signal of a whistle, marched to a drum and manned barriers along the roads to catch their prey. The killers of the genocide did the same thing. The use of the term kubohoza for rape was a continuation of an attitude that accepted violence as normal in the pursuit of political ends.”<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Taylor, “Dialectics”, 296.

<sup>34</sup> *Audio Transcripts*, Genocide Archive of Rwanda, aired April 12, 1994 on *Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines*.  
[https://genocidearchiverwanda.org.rw/index.php/Category:Audio\\_Transcripts](https://genocidearchiverwanda.org.rw/index.php/Category:Audio_Transcripts)

<sup>35</sup> Nowrojee, “Shattered Lives,” 65.

In the above description, some common tactics of the genocide, roadblocks and whistles are evident. Documentary footage of the *genocidaires* often features Hutu killers adorned with banana leaves. Survivor accounts complete the picture of *kubohoza* in practice. “Nadia”, a survivor recounting her experience of being gang raped when she was eleven years old after seeing her parents hacked to death with machetes, recalled recognizing some of her attackers, but she “was not sure because their faces were covered in a chalky paste.”<sup>36</sup> Another, “Constance”, who was four months pregnant during the genocide, recalls that the *interahamwe* who murdered her husband, then imprisoned and raped her along with about fifty other women “had banana leaves draped over their shoulders and on their head and waist.”<sup>37</sup> Another survivor, “Anne” recalls that the militiamen who raped her after they burned her house and slaughtered all four of her children in front of her “were wearing banana leaves around their waist and on their head and across their chests.”<sup>38</sup>

*Kubohoza* dress and tactics were clearly used in the genocide. To those who do not speak Kinyarwanda, evidence of RTLM’s complicity in mass rape and gendercide within the context of its archival translations might seem flimsy, since direct exhortation to rape appears absent from the station’s broadcasts. But for those Rwandans who listened to RTLM in 1994, who spoke the language and understood the coded messages embedded therein, the directive of “Radio Machete” was clear: reclaim your manhood, rape the Tutsis.

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<sup>36</sup> Nowrojee, “Shattered Lives,” 34.

<sup>37</sup> Nowrojee, “Shattered Lives,” 32.

<sup>38</sup> Nowrojee, “Shattered Lives,” 31.

**Poverty: “After eating herself, she refused to give me part of the remains. She said she wasn’t going to sweat for me. ‘Stay there. I don’t care if you starve to death or not.’”<sup>39</sup>**

While the genocide is not preordained by poverty and overpopulation, the presence of widespread, endemic poverty and the threat of impending famine should not be ignored in accounting for RTLTM’s success in recruiting thousands of Rwandans in the genocidal project of its shareholders.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, to return to one of the older meanings of *kubohoza*, the concept could be read as a way of assuaging resource scarcity in the Thousand Hills as arable land, desiccated by the drought, became ever scarcer and starvation loomed on the shivering horizon. Considering the threat of famine, it is perhaps little wonder that the genocide, once ignited, became an orgiastic revelry of plunder, cattle rustling, and land-grabbing. Hutus were directed to take whatever they wanted from their victims, and perpetrator accounts are rife with descriptions of *interahamwe* slaughtering and feasting on the cattle taken from their victims.<sup>41</sup>

Indeed, for many Hutu, the genocide was a celebration of excess and a relief from impoverished lifestyles. The exigent plunder-as-payment incentive that spurred the atrocity gave rise to a new economy as the killers bartered and sold their gains. One perpetrator remembers,

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<sup>39</sup> *We Survived*. Whitworth, ed., 88. Jeanette Nibagwire, who was eleven years old at the time of the genocide, recalls begging for food on the brink of starvation while she hid in the swamps and with various strangers following the death of her father and the disappearance of her mother. The conversation here noted was with an older woman who promised to help her beg so they could both eat, but once they had enough food, the woman proceeded to eat it all in front of the starving 11-year-old.

<sup>40</sup> Fletcher, “Turning interahamwe,” 27-34.

<sup>41</sup> See generally Perpetrator’s Confessions, Genocide Archive of Rwanda. [https://genocidearchiverwanda.org.rw/index.php?title=Kmc00540/kmc00540\\_vid7.mp4&gsearchh=](https://genocidearchiverwanda.org.rw/index.php?title=Kmc00540/kmc00540_vid7.mp4&gsearchh=)

“We felt carefree and satisfied. We didn’t have to pay tax to anyone. We didn’t have to haggle. We drank very well due to the money we had come across. We ate the best meat of those we had killed... We slept well due to the good food and the fatigue of the day.”<sup>42</sup> He also asserts that “[d]uring the dry seasons [in the years leading up to the genocide], the Hutus heard important people repeat that the Tutsis occupied too many allotments, that these people [the Tutsi] were hindering the attempt to fight poverty.” Still another remembers rumors that the Tutsi were raising cattle secretly to hoard for themselves while the Hutu went without.<sup>43</sup> Fletcher argues that “[i]t may be true that material interests alone cannot account for the Rwandan genocide, but more research may show that it was an important factor motivating some of the killers.”<sup>44</sup> The jealousies and fears of people who had never known economic stability were fertile soil for RTLM’s twisted jeremiads, warning Hutus of “killers who only think of their stomachs.”<sup>45</sup> Telling listeners “[w]hen you kill an *Inkotanyi* (“one who attacks fiercely”, a word used for the RPF and all Tutsi in Rwanda interchangeably as a method of conflation), you find money on him...”<sup>46</sup> What’s more, RTLM often framed the carnage as “work” in their broadcasts, encouraging Hutus to engage in genocide in the same way which they engaged in any other

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<sup>42</sup> Fletcher. “Turning Interahamwe,” 33.

<sup>43</sup> Fletcher. “Turning Interahamwe,” 31.

<sup>44</sup> Fletcher. “Turning interahamwe,” 29.

<sup>45</sup> *Audio Transcripts*, Genocide Archive of Rwanda, aired May 17, 1994 on *Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines*.

[https://genocidearchiverwanda.org.rw/index.php/Category:Audio\\_Transcripts](https://genocidearchiverwanda.org.rw/index.php/Category:Audio_Transcripts)

<sup>46</sup> *Audio Transcripts*, Genocide Archive of Rwanda, aired May 18, 1994 on *Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines*.

[https://genocidearchiverwanda.org.rw/index.php/Category:Audio\\_Transcripts](https://genocidearchiverwanda.org.rw/index.php/Category:Audio_Transcripts)

quotidian task of, for example, cultivation or construction. In RTLM's world, genocide was a job, a labor of terror which supported an economy and advanced a national progress narrative, same as any other.<sup>47</sup>

**War: “In 1990 the Rwandan Patriotic Front [RPF] attacked from Uganda... They [the RAF/*interahamwe*] started to search our homes, saying that we were accomplices. They would ask us where our sons were, and if you didn't know, that was it. You would be taken and killed.”<sup>48</sup>**

Identifying a cohesive message or directive within RTLM's transcripts can be difficult. The station dissembles, exhorts, excuses, misinforms, informs, seemingly all at once. Calls for Hutu/Tutsi unity can be found directly alongside spitting racialized derision. Selective use of convenient sampling could be applied to construct an image of RTLM wholly separate from the one found in this article. It was a hydra with eight heads, each spinning whatever narrative best suited the plans of the *akazu* and the political needs of the moment. The one thing which can be said with unassailable certainty about RTLM is this: it was a weapon of war, and the genocide it helped to propagate was a tactic meant to secure the victory of the Hutu Power government

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<sup>47</sup> Darryl Li, “Echoes of Violence: considerations on radio and genocide in Rwanda,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 6 (March 2004): 9-27, 12.

<sup>48</sup> *We Survived*. Wentworth, ed., 59. Tharcisse Mukama remembers civilian massacres carried out by the RAF in 1990 as a warfighting strategy against the RPF (who also massacred civilians) advance into Rwanda. He was 63 years old at the time of the genocide in 1994. He witnessed Rwanda's troubles from the Hutu revolution in 1959 and through the subsequent conflicts across the decades. He lost the bar he owned, his land, his wife, and six of his eight children in the genocide.

over the invading RPF through annihilation of the Tutsi.<sup>49</sup> Broadcasts regularly featured victorious and news of a war which they were losing. The RPF, and by conflation all Tutsi, were characterized as violent and delusional, duplicitous in their asserted aims, wholly unequal to the task of toppling the Hutu Power government, doomed to fail and die at victorious Hutu hands bathed in the glory of 1959. Like its use of racial invective, RTLM's references to the ongoing invasion are so ubiquitous as to defy the scope of this paper. Nearly any random transcript will yield numerous examples of it. It is, perhaps, a more revealing strategy to study the music and message of Rwanda's most popular performer, RTLM's musical superstar and shareholder, Simon Bikindi, as an example of wartime propaganda.

Jason McCoy, who wrote his dissertation on Bikindi and maintained a relationship with him until he died in 2015, does not characterize him as a tribalist, or even as an opportunist. Instead, McCoy asserts that Bikindi was a realist, an artist more concerned with his ability to perform than with his ability to incite violence and that Bikindi fulfilled the historical role of musicians in Rwanda and carried on old traditions of court performers who were expected to praise the current rulers and write songs to encourage Rwanda's warriors. Of the 25-song catalogue of Bikindi's songs which aired on RTLM, eight were about Rwandan history, particularly the Hutu uprising of 1959, and nine were about the RPF invasion and civil war of 1990-1994. RTLM used these songs to break up long and potentially boring discussions or speeches which were usually rife with anti-Tutsi sentiment and calls for direct violence. They

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<sup>49</sup> Stanton. "Prevented?", 55. See also Martin Shaw, "Genocide as a Form of War," *Genocide*, edited by Adam Jones (Los Angeles: Sage) 2008, 157-174, 171. Shaw argues that "genocide has become a large part of the practice of 'new wars'. A key aim of state elites has been to destroy the power of certain groups, plural urban as well as ethnic communities, and with the lives of large numbers of its members. In Rwanda, this aim was unprecedentedly open, literally broadcast over the airwaves to simultaneously mobilize perpetrators and threaten victims."

were also coordinated to air before and during *interahamwe* and RAF rallies, Bikindi even performed live at some of those rallies.<sup>50</sup> In their article, “Song as a propaganda tool in the genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda,” Évariste Ntakirutimana and Marie-Claire Uwamariya examine the messages of Hutu ethnic solidarity and anti-Tutsi ideology in Bikindi’s music as well the context in which RTLM presented that music to its listeners, showing that Bikindi’s “songs were also meant to boost the morale of the army, especially the combatants” even as their riddling lyrical turns led the audience to conclude that violent “defense” of Hutu identity against Tutsi infiltration and invasion was necessary.<sup>51</sup>

As shown above, RTLM drew no distinction between combatants in the RPF and Tutsi civilians. Whatever Bikindi’s motivations, whether they were grounded in genocidal ideation or dreams of a successful musical career, RTLM employed his music to empower and entertain *interahamwe* and RAF fighters who engaged the RPF and to encourage civilian massacres against the Tutsi at the same time as part of a comprehensive program of genocidal wartime propaganda.

**Conclusion: “My mother had been everything to me. She loved me and wanted the best in life for me... I heard her voice saying, ‘What will become of you without me?’... How could they do that to her? What on earth had she done to them?”<sup>52</sup>**

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<sup>50</sup> Robert H. Snyder, “Disillusioned Words like Bullets Bark’: Incitement to Genocide, Music, and the Trial of Simon Bikindi”, *Georgia Journal of International and Comparative Law* 35, 645-674, 670.

<sup>51</sup> Ntakirutimana and Uwamariya, “Song as a propaganda tool”, 240.

<sup>52</sup> *We Survived*. Whitworth, ed., 174. Beata Uwazaninka was 14 at the time of the genocide. Her father died when she was two and was raised by her mother. She grew up in



In one of his most popular songs, *Nanga abahutu* (“I hate these Hutu”), Bikindi used the coded lyrics which typify Rwandan lyrical tradition to demonize Hutu moderates as ethnic traitors who had turned their back on their heritage. He references Rwandan legends and pseudo history, painting “these Hutu” as a dangerous, corruptive presence who sell their own people unto annihilation as one part of an overarching genocidal agenda. “I speak to those who understand” is a refrain to which the singer returns throughout the song. It is a dog whistle, signaling violence against a perceived other. A cypher to those who did not share Bikindi’s perspective, but a clarion call for those who did.

RTLM worked in the same fashion. Its broadcasts appear dizzying and contradictory, with gory exhortations to violence in a confused tangle with calls for pan-ethnic solidarity and pan-tribal nationalism, prayers for peace and news of war, “[c]ombining the message of hatred with a call for unity.”<sup>53</sup> Contextualizing those messages within a framework that accounts for Rwanda’s extant racial hierarchy, genderized oppression, economic collapse, and civil war clarifies the station’s motives in executing a carefully planned, top-down genocidal agenda. Interrogations at Rwanda’s historical crossroads of colonial violence and the cultural and economic mutilation left in its wake with notions of manhood, work, entertainment, and

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northern Rwanda, where Hutu Power sentiment was strongest, and lost her grandmother to anti-Tutsi violence in 1987 when Hutu Power hardliners invaded her home and beat her to death with hammers. Uwazanika’s mother was drowned in a tributary of the Nyaborongo River near the town of Gitarama just before it was taken by the RPF, effectively ending the genocide there. Uwazanika’s confirmation of her mother’s death came in the form a woman she did not know wearing her mother’s clothes. In her story, she expresses hope for a reborn Rwanda from a soul burdened with ineffable loss. “If you kill someone,” she says, “you take his or her life away and it’s impossible to mend it. It has gone forever. Those people have gone and cannot give forgiveness. Even if I forgive the man who killed my mother, she’s no longer there to forgive him. I may forgive, but I won’t ever forget... How can there be forgiveness when the impact of genocide is still with us?”

<sup>53</sup> Ntakirutimana and Uwamariya. “Song as a propaganda tool,” 246.

celebrity help to explain the appeal of RTL M across Rwanda as it further normalized antecedent horrors into an obliterating crescendo which still shakes the conscience of the world two decades later, on the eve of its 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

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