

Box 1: Witness accounts and documentation : a note on methodology

Research of this nature requires access to original documentation and to contributions from privileged observers. For this study, even more than in previous publications, I benefitted from decisive support from numerous witnesses and participants in the events. This was greatly facilitated by my personal acquaintance with many among them well before 1994.

Since 1979, as a researcher, I had embarked upon comparative research of the peasantry in central Africa, undertaking frequent expert missions for international and bilateral aid and development organizations (ILO, World Bank, UNDP, Swiss Cooperation, etc.). From 1984-1986 onwards, periodic monitoring of agricultural development programs in Burundi as well as in Rwanda led me to undertake a series of extended fieldtrips to conduct several research projects, which then allowed me to become familiar with almost all of the communes in both countries. In a region where 90% of the population survived on agriculture and where the elites remained very attached to their region of origin, this closeness to the land allowed me to develop strong and lasting links with many families on both sides of the border and, more broadly, in the adjacent riverine provinces of the former Zaïre. When regional tensions mounted in 1987, leading to massive expulsions of foreign residents, I was solicited to weigh in on several contentious points that were impeding ratification of the Convention on the free circulation of goods and persons in the Economic Community of the countries of the Great Lakes (CEPGL, which included Burundi, Rwanda and Zaïre). Based on that, I was preoccupied with the question of emigrants (longstanding and recent migrants) whose resettlement, resident status, and nationality were being contested – and in particular the frequency, inherently conflictual, of the situation for hundreds of thousands of refugees who were expecting to have their fate determined, some of them since the 1950s. Beyond official political spheres, I thus was led to meet with a number of those who became obligatory interlocutors with the powers that be over the course of the 1990s, expressing themselves on behalf of opposition political groups or armed movements, in situations where the majority of their leaders and activists were resident abroad. Participating in various mediations and conferences in 1991 and 1992, just like the monitoring for emergency aid programs, deepened this involvement, and this would include periods or events that led many foreigners to avoid the region. This explains how I happened to be in Kigali in March-April 1994. This trip to Rwanda was part of a series of exploratory missions for technical support organized by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) of the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA) and was expected to last three weeks. The objective was to review the development programs of this agency with Rwanda and to oversee the transfer of authority to newly appointed ministers.

In many regards, this trip signaled a decisive turning point in my life. Firstly, because of what it represents as a personal engagement on the ground and over the weeks that followed, and especially, since then, over the course of several months a year in the region, up to the present day. Aside from the numerous missions for mediation or assistance, the most significant demands came from the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR, created by the UN Security Council in November 1994) and from numerous national jurisdictions, charged with judging the crimes committed during the war years. I testified in roughly thirty cases against genocide suspects, both as a “factual” and as an “expert” witness. Aside from the moral obligation imposed on researchers specializing in this region to testify about what they know of the context and the actors (really the suspects and accused), this strong obligation also flows from the juridical imperative that tends to bind all direct witnesses, since I was actually on mission in Kigali in March-April 1994. In this

framework, dozens of missions and several months of field investigations, which included perusal of a good number of archives and privileged access to exclusive or hitherto unexploited sources of information, ultimately produced several biographical studies, organized by region or thematically, which served as a platform for testimony at trial and other publications.

Very strong personal links, established in this region over the previous thirty years, allowed me to interview and question a good number of figures, even on very delicate matters. Even more auspicious, now, over fifteen years since these events, many of them wish to express themselves, and for some among them at least, to make public the information and the documentation at their disposal.

This was the case for several of the best-informed military and civilian leaders who were willing to devote substantial efforts of recall and analysis to facilitate and substantiate investigations. This willingness to engage deserves recognition. The feeling that the time has arrived for the “truth” to finally be revealed, and especially to be heard, on a number of persistent hazy points in the civil war explains this willingness to collaborate, even if the risks encountered by their authors, easily identifiable to their peers, remain significant.¹

Even though, obviously, it is clearly impossible to reveal their identities, the importance of their contributions cannot be overstated: this would include persons with whom I have had regular exchanges since the early 1990s and who have consistently supported my wide-ranging, and at times quite sensitive, investigations, and also those who, when consulted on very specific points, accepted to respond to my particular, yet decisive, questions. All should know the extent to which I am indebted and appreciative of their confidence.

I thank them all the more now, realizing how those repeated consultations with so many allowed me to exploit information and analyses that I had compiled over the past fifteen years, with their assistance. Information and analyses that, quite often, I poorly understood because they were too rich and complex for me at the time. Understanding the functioning of the political sphere requires a particularly heightened awareness of the various personalities and the networks within which they moved, at a time when discretion, feigned ignorance or deliberate dissimulation are guiding rules. In addition, when previous studies on the war and the genocide at the prefectural and communal levels were underway, I had had access to a base of reference that was already quite rich, linked as it was to numerous field investigations undertaken over many years in the framework of my work in rural sociology and economics. And I could repeatedly return to the field to meet up with the surviving actors or spend entire days in the prisons with those whose fate henceforth depended – rightly or wrongly – on justice. It was thus possible to quickly delineate the social mores, the lived spaces, and thus the relevant framework for an understanding.

¹ I feel compelled to mention Lt.-Col. Augustin Cyiza, whose commitment to truth ultimately cost him his life. This officer and jurist was easily one of the most lucid figures of this period. He was one of those rare observers who maintained close, unambiguous relationships with all of the parties to the conflict. Unbrokered and independent, and de facto without commission – he presided over a non-existent Conseil de guerre (Court Martial) – he worked for peace assiduously and with great determination. His analytical capacity, his objectivity and the candor of his words consistently perturbed his interlocutors, who he casually disarmed by simply exposing their calculations. These risky habits by a man with no protectors earned him many enmities. He was kidnapped on 23 April 2003 by agents of the Rwanda security services and has never been heard of since (*cf.* André GUICHAOUA, “Postface. Le 23 avril 2003”, in Augustin CYIZA, *Un homme libre au Rwanda*, Karthala, Paris, 2004, p. 209-213). A complete dossier of his case was submitted to the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in Geneva.

A similar approach was hardly appropriate in the framework of the present study, bearing in mind the significant and shifting prerogatives of the key figures in this war, the multiplicity of roles in which they were engaged, and the uncertain delineations in the various spheres of their activities. The paradox unique to the status of foreign researcher made all its effects known. On the one hand, it greatly facilitated accumulating a large volume of information, which most national interlocutors are not in a position to amass because they lack the means, but also because of their public profiles and the personal implications (familial, regional, socio-professional, religious, ideological and political). Yet, on the other hand, the foreigner remains blind to the intimate logic that he does not master or simply “cannot see.” Distance of this nature finds quite beautiful expression in a Kinyarwanda saying: *“Agahinda k’inkoko kamenywa n’inkike yatoyemo”* (literally, “The sorrow of the hen is only known to the back yard”). This expression forcefully underscores the difficulty of fully appreciating all of the dynamics in this war and the tendency of observers to compensate for the lack of data or materials and weaknesses in the analyses with evidence of common explanations.

Then again, the position of foreign researcher can be advantageous for reasons beyond greater access to materials and familiarity with actors and events when it allows him to extricate or distance himself from circular reasoning, stock arguments and, especially, the presumptions and the strategic calculations routinely ascribed to the participants. If, despite the passing years, each new account or discovery of obscured or suppressed information reinforces the feeling of a lack of finality in investigations and the unfinished nature of the analysis, this sentiment is balanced by intense “experiences of truth,” in the words of Hannah Arendt, laden with meaning, revealing other coherences and incoherencies which allow thinking and understanding broad swathes of history.

Two insurmountable difficulties or limitations persist however, and significantly weigh on the analysis. The first, quite decisive, has to do with the position of certain of the key figures who, because of the posts they held or their responsibilities, then or now, simply cannot or do not care to reveal themselves. The legal ramifications are a deterrent for those who risk investigation or who are incarcerated already, or who could be. But more generally, the threat and the broader politico-judicial extortions at the disposal of the new Rwandan authorities vis-à-vis all of the witnesses who could express themselves about past events are chilling factors. The broad outlines of an official history of the genocide and its antecedents were drawn to legitimize the outbreak of war and an exclusive conquest of power, and then to justify a quasi-totalitarian mobilization of the populace, who must submit to intense ideological reeducation. Equipped with a judicial arsenal that permits investigations of any political or ideological deviance, the authorities are able to head off or censure any approach that undermines the approved narrative. And, more precisely, any historical analysis that attempts to situate the 1994 genocide in the context of a war, for the most part initiated by the RPF, and beyond that, to also analyze how the RPF conducted that war. The obscurantism is only mirrored in the adverse camp, essentially in regard to the presidential clan and those close to the late Juvénal Habyarimana, who maintain a very effective lock-down on all those who might be tempted to “desert” the received truths. This “black-out” is bolstered by supportive networks in diplomatic circles for all of the parties implicated in the conflict, little inclined to find themselves (re) placed in the middle of polemics that are continually reignited by those same Rwandan passions.

A second limitation relates to taking note of the very weak volume of research conducted on the war itself, particularly by well-informed Rwandan authors, an observation aggravated by the extreme poverty of factual references supporting most of these works. This present study attempts to remedy these shortcomings, based on extensive documentation from that period and from witness accounts that were suppressed or difficult to access. Certainly, over the course of the years, witness have often distanced themselves from their early accounts of events and adopt what others have

recounted to them or what they prefer to believe. The mixture of actual and reconstructed recollections is difficult to disentangle without calling into question the spontaneity, candor and credibility of the person who provokes the recounting. This interrogation of the veracity of the accounts is all the more pronounced when the interlocutor, in one form or another, senses himself to be recognized as a victim, or sees him in such terms. Thus, one must expose the “truth” that spills out from unveiling the lived trauma, the selection of facts linked to the grooming for the role of witness, the assimilation of which is henceforth validated as sacred truth. But the most important is to consistently diminish the forgotten portions of innocuous events, suppressed facts, denied realities, secrets kept by calculation or by necessity, because it is almost always possible afterwards to trace back through the sequence of events and locate other witnesses who will validate or invalidate it. As we will see later, whole chapters have been dedicated to disentangling the lines and the outcomes of the consistently complex political intrigues. Intersecting intrigues that justly befuddle observers and diplomats, most of whom only perceive the surface of events.

But despite the explanations and the foreshowings of the analysis, grave dissatisfaction will prevail for Rwandan actors who lived, or suffered, through them from day to day. Here, I am not referring to the dissatisfactions provoked by the facts and analyses that contradict the agreed upon history, but to the discontinuities that inevitably remain. In fact, if the coherence between events and decisions of one or the other can henceforth be considered as globally correct, if the initial alternatives include the developments that finally obtained, the narrative only partially accounts for the risks of the moment that weighed on the expectations and longings of the actors and, often, affected the way events played out.

In raising this point, I resort to frequent remarks from my interlocutors and proof readers, who often think that not “having wanted” certain decisions in regard to major political incidents, or no having anticipated them, regret having gone beyond the breaking points without having been able to prevent it. Remarks often justified in so far as they could support them with specific references or alternative, incontestable versions. In light of the tragic events that followed and the individual and collective responsibilities that flow from them, these reservations should be taken into account to present an analysis that is genuinely consistent with the events, thus avoiding false continuities in the sequencing of incidents or strategic intentions that could have been abusively introduced *a posteriori*, if only because of inadequate editing. Even if the picking apart is not always easy, reintroducing this effective – and inevitable – notion of indeterminacy in the sequence of events seems necessary to appreciate the logic of the participants, to extract or re-establish the “reality of the real.”

In fact, as the multiplicity of accounts seems to suggest, political confrontations between highly placed officials involved as many “rational” calculations as roleplay or questions of “temperament.” Harsh words, fits of anger, unexpected encounters or events, or inversely “honey-coated words,” abrupt retorts, or momentary reprieves could disrupt conversations or meetings, or create alliances or ruptures. One could cite any number of major decisions that were finally sealed in spite of the “objective interests,” and this at the end of futile considerations of precedence or sudden irritation. Elements that appear anecdotal, often left out of neatly tailored summaries, yet reveal themselves to be decisive when they finally occur. In addition, a number of interlocutors wanted me to mention the asymmetry of political actors in regard to available information, the greater or lesser familiarity with the practices and the intrigues of “democratic” debate. Tensions born of wartime weighed heavily on the individuals, then the political formations that were barely getting started in the inter-parties competition without having yet clarified the rules and procedures that could give substance to the new demands within and among those parties. Although having themselves become full fledged

politicians, those who inherited the single party who became dispersed in the various formations of the opposition and the majority in 1991 and 1992 maintained tight interpersonal relationships, overlapping with the links to their region of origin, family relations, religious affinities, schoolmates and political buddies. They frequented one another, lived together, separated and came back together again (in the literal, and also the figurative sense of the term) just like close associates, friends, rivals and adversaries. This background was always present, even and especially for those who on weekends, holidays or owing to social obligation drank beer together and then would regroup on Monday to resolve, calmly or excitedly, their political differences.

The approach is a bit different for the persons and interlocutors for the RPF, who, even with relatively strong interpersonal relations had been established, emerged from a very different political culture. The insurmountable refrain with persons from the “interior” is rooted in the confrontation between two universes: the first composed of “civilians,” including when then appeared in uniform; and the second distinguished by a military order whose rules and sanctions applied with the same discipline to all of the “civilians.” In this context, the weight of the uncertainties and the incidence of personal coefficients were extremely reduced in the analysis of the strategies of the actors and an understanding of the objectives pursued. Errors, dysfunctions, gaps could arise in an appreciation of the environment, the implementation of operations, but once plans were finalized and the operations undertaken, the global cohesion, the collective will, the commitment of men raised no doubt whatsoever because the “deviants” had been completely sidelined.

One last remark concerns the numerous documents and witness accounts reproduced in this book. They are not simple add-ons, they are clearly references and indispensable complements to clarify or support the exposé, but they provide much more than that. Several point to specific developments – and in many cases offer fresh insights – that are indispensable for an understanding. Bearing in mind their usefulness, a decision was made to include them in the corpus of the text (or, where space would not allow, referenced in annexes that are accessible on a website) so that readers can appreciate for themselves the revelations that they contain.

The result, I trust, is a publication and a text that is both original and engaging. In fact, in order to unravel the sequencing of certain obscure events, or to effectively link events that may not have initially appeared to be related, certain chapters or developments are inevitably enriched by biographical or chronological details, etc., leading to a highly unorthodox work, especially when compared to the more standardized texts with which most readers are familiar. The establishment of a dedicated website that the reader is routinely invited to consult, with over a hundred annexes and boxed commentary relating to the text comes from the same concern. To my mind, it is important that those who read this book be in a position to access unadulterated, “raw” evidence (for example, documents originally drafted in Kinyarwanda – particularly the agendas and diaries – accompanied by a translation). For this reason, when several witness accounts address the same facts, I juxtapose them to illustrate the diversity of viewpoints and to demonstrate their convergences and contradictions. This approach also allows for an objective assessment of how much work remains to be done to exploit these materials more exhaustively.