

Dateline Rwanda, May 30 - June 6, 2007

Six days and seven nights in Rwanda with my colleagues Andre Proctor and Jed Emerson preparing a blended valuation for a proposed high-end eco-lodge. Land into the five-star Aga Khan-owned hotel in Kigali where we stayed (built since the Genocide, so not literally Hotel Rwanda) that is a hub of international connection to post-Genocide Rwanda – buzzing with deals, hustles, and dreams. Step out of this jet set bubble to visit the national Genocide Memorial on the outskirts of town. Fill in between these magnetic poles of Brand Rwanda with four days of visits to development projects, the national park where the lodge is to be located, and various government officials at national, provincial and local levels. I am drawn to the breaking point by this exposure to the extremities of our human existence.

Thirteen years ago close to a million people here (15 percent of the population and over 60 percent of the targeted Tutsi group) were slaughtered over a 100-day period. (Where was I?) The exile-based Rwandan Patriotic Front rebel army responded to the Genocide with a full-on military campaign, eventually capturing the country and enabling the return of over 700,000 Rwandan Tutsis and Hutu moderates who were living in exile in neighboring countries, many since the 50s and 60s.

I can detect no obvious tensions among this complex weave of survivors, executioners, bystanders and returnees. All is hidden beneath an 'enlightened purpose' – to forge a single Rwandan identity and 'move on'. The identities of Hutu and Tutsi are no longer recognized officially here in any way and are discouraged socially. Rwandans see these historic identities as a problem to be fixed and consider the question "Are you Hutu or Tutsi?" to be impolite and uninformed. The genocide is a 'painful part of our story', but not one people wish to dwell on. They do not consider inquiries about it to be impolite, but not surprisingly, their answers are determinedly superficial. Maybe direct questions are just the wrong instruments to detect the meaning of genocide. I have noticed that Rwandans are very aware of pain and are quick to acknowledge it. I cut myself shaving one morning and there was a small piece of tissue on my neck as I entered the breakfast room at the hotel. The woman who greeted me touched her neck and asked me what happened and was I OK. How long would I have wandered among people who did not know me in Europe or the US before someone responded like that I wonder? Throughout the trip I have been charmed by a common soft-spoken sensibility to other people that is incredibly attractive. Is this a longstanding cultural trait, or is it a product of genocide?

The countryside is dotted with memorials to the Genocide; most are churches where mass massacres occurred as people went to them for refuge. I went to one church one and a half hours from the capital where 10,000 people were tortured, violated and slaughtered. The walls and floor have been cleansed, but the thirty foot high ceiling is still spattered with blood and riddled with bullet holes. The mass graves are made up of stacks of large coffins each containing the remains of some 100 people. The national Genocide Memorial in Kigali is brave, open, intelligent, and moving beyond words. It explains the history of Tutsi and Hutu identities, emphasizing their fluidity in pre-colonial times and their gradual reification into a deadly invidiousness in colonial and post-colonial states. I was completely gutted by the two hours I spent there, and broke down completely in the children's hall, which was introduced by a simple line on the wall beside the entrance, "They Were Supposed To Be Our Future."

During my years at the Ford Foundation supporting the 'non-racial' liberation struggle in South Africa I identified strongly with the black consciousness dissidents like Steve Biko (and most of the Ford grantees), who argued that fundamental questions of identity and power could and should not be dismissed by an ideology, however noble. I think that time has shown that they were largely correct (not everyone would agree). So I come to Rwanda with a skepticism for any project to deconstruct historic identities. I do see the necessity and even the wisdom. Yet I am haunted by Jungian shadows, and I am alert for the hidden tensions that lie beneath the surface.

One of our party, an American pastor who has been assiduously channeling American investment here for two and a half years and is deeply committed to the country, says, "Could it happen again? I can't say that it wouldn't. But I also cannot find fault with the way this country is dealing with unspeakable horror." Paradoxically, this does feel like a place that has come to a deep reservation about social engineering and ideology in general. They are pragmatic in an American kind of way and I have found myself thinking more than once about the fundamental distrust of power that lies at the heart of American political psyche. Is this a post-nationalist African state? If so, it would be the first.

The country is moving ahead. Economic growth is strong, averaging over 4 percent in the past five years. The government is open, hardworking, dedicated, reportedly uncorrupt -- among the most impressive I have encountered in 25 years of work in Africa. The human resource base is thin, with the familiar third world pattern of a world class top tier and a rapid drop immediately after that. We in the West forget that this is the norm and we are the exception. As a world of 6 billion people, there are 100 million people with annual income of over \$20,000. **1 billion live on a dollar a day. 3 billion on less than 5 dollars a day. The richest one percent in the world owns 40 percent of the planet's wealth, and half of world's adults own just 1 percent.**

Foreign influence is very large, and is driven by official aid, which amounts to half of the government budget. Why would a government develop democratic practices of accountability to its citizens when a majority may have participated in a genocidal rampage and it does not rely on those citizens for the revenues to run the country? Given the wealth disparities in our world, foreign aid is a 'necessary evil' and from what I can see Rwandans are handling it as well as anyone. They are keen to wean from aid and move into sustainable market-driven solutions. Paradoxically, even more foreign assistance is needed to get out of the poverty trap of a small, densely populated, impoverished, poorly educated (40 percent literacy), land-locked country with few mineral resources and limited agricultural export potential. But of course it needs to be the right kind of aid, and this is always in very short supply. Rwandans respond very positively to our Keystone rap on mutual accountability and the alternative metrics that we are pushing that capture the extent to which a governmental or non-governmental organization seeking to deliver some social benefit is actually accountable to those meant to receive that benefit. Other 'western' institutions respond to the Keystone propositions more defensively, and I have encountered the 'we do that too' attitude more than once. I wish they really did! In my experience, the ones that do respond by asking how we can exchange experience.

Which brings me back to hidden tensions. The government uses law and a large army to enforce its 'zero tolerance' policy on 'divisionist speech' and 'genocide ideology'. The judiciary is formally independent, but it knows where the government draws the line and it upholds the government's high sensitivity to dissent or criticism. In the view of international human rights groups like Freedom House and Human Rights Watch, Rwanda is already on the slippery slope to political authoritarianism. A number of journalists are under arrest. Organized civil society is weak: no one I asked could recommend a single national civil society organization! International development NGOs, in contrast, are highly visible and active. The prevention of future genocide trumps all other considerations and political leadership is highly centralized, as personified in the president, Paul Kagame. The political question is whether the visionary, principled and hard-working Kagame will become yet another African political despot. Will he build a tolerant, pluralist and democratic society? Or will he find it necessary to tighten the reins on political power even while liberalizing the economy?

Ensuring political stability is a genuine issue, as are post-genocide imperatives for justice and reconciliation. There are 70,000 prisoners – known universally as *genocidaires* – and as one drives around the country one frequently sees them in work gangs in their identifying lilac-colored cottons. We passed by several community-level 'gacaca courts', which meet under trees next to the main roads across the country each week to pass sentences on those who have provided detailed testimony of their crimes. Most who come clean are now being released for time served (now over a decade). There are significant armed rebels, remnants of the genocidal Hutu extremist Interahamwe, mostly in eastern Congo, and occasional excursions across the border from both sides continue to destabilize the region and remind Rwandans of the necessity of a strong military state.

The answer to which way Rwanda will go may lie in the starkest 'hidden difference' here, between the returnees and the, for want of a better term, 'non-returnees'. For four of my six days here I was completely unaware of this difference, but in the final two days I discovered that virtually every government official or local business entrepreneur (there are no local citizen organizations to speak of) that I met was a returnee. As it was explained to me when I began to ask about this, the returnees are characteristically extroverted, educated, English-speaking, confident, proud, driven, hard-working. They are concentrated in Kigali, the dominant source of political and economic power. The non-returnees, by contrast, are described as 'still in shock', 'introverted', 'passive', 'waiting for directions', 'oddly detached'. They meet civic obligations (for example, road verges impressively maintained with flower beds across the country) rather than express civic drive.

The returnees' ascendance is closely linked to their dominance as the main brokers to foreign aid and foreign assistance. Andre noted a parallel with South Africa here, but on a smaller scale. The commercial attache at the US Embassy told us a story that illustrates this point. For the first year he was here, he said, he systematically introduced American retailers visiting Rwanda to two potential local suppliers of handicrafts. Both were women and both were, in his view, viable partners. One was a returnee and one was not. Eighteen months later and the returnee had supply contracts with three major US retailers. The non-returnee had not closed a deal and was beginning to complain that the explanation for her competitor's success was due to her competitor being from the same Ugandan refugee camp as the deputy minister of trade.

I leave Rwanda with more questions than answers. How does one close the door on genocide ideology and hate speech without opening another door to discrimination? Even if there is no intention to discriminate, the differences in access to power and resources and the outside world result in de facto discrimination in the absence of mechanisms to redress it. What are those affirmative mechanisms for Rwanda? How can they operate when differences are officially discouraged? How do you ensure no discrimination if you are prevented from acknowledging it? The US commercial attache strongly supported the policies of the Rwandan government, while at the same time admitted that the failure to address de facto patterns of discrimination was a 'ticking time bomb'.

I also left with a cornucopia of very positive impressions and delightful experiences...camping with national parks rangers who prepared a spectacular dinner on the campfire of goat brochettes, rice, and maize meal (we supplied single malt whiskey and Belgian chocolate, and where Andre quipped to the winsome and thoughtful young American resort developer leading our trip that this was 'not a six star experience, but a 74 billion star experience')...a promising rural artists coop (we pretty much bought the place out)...well-run health projects by a couple of US-based NGOs...a failing game lodge (owned by Rwandans and we hope to help them make it successful in partnership with the proposed high end lodge that would be owned mainly by foreigners)...and the search for one of the world's rarest and funkiest birds, the African Shoebill.

I came to Rwanda to design a way for a foreign investment in a high-end safari lodge to maximize the social and environmental value for the people of Rwanda. I left with a strong sense of the wider value maximization possibilities of the proposed lodge, but also a sense that its commercial success or failure would depend on factors largely beyond its control. This is not a reason not to do it; it may even be a further reason to do it. This is because the lodge could propagate and foster the kinds of relationships between and among investors, business operators, tourists and Rwandans from all parts of society that are the essential ingredients of an open, tolerant and prosperous society in today's interdependent world. It could encourage the development of citizen self-organization for public benefit. It could fail commercially because of another outbreak of communal violence or a gradual erosion of democracy and human rights, but still succeed in planting seeds of tolerance, fairness and socially minded enterprise that would eventually germinate.

A very high proportion of the people that we met on this trip – Rwandans and foreigners alike – were inspiring, committed and determined to 'get it right' in Rwanda, to honor the memories of those lost in the Genocide. This is one new beginning that one can contribute to, and learn from. I am full of gratitude for the opportunity to become part of the Rwandan story.

Maybe to end with story from the national Genocide Memorial. "Frodouald Karuhije saved the lives of 14 Tutsis in Gitarama, protecting them for over a month. He hid them in trenches that he dug on his land. His sister cooked and his 12-year-old niece took the food disguised in a dustbin to the hiding Tutsis. He had dug the trench so he could hide from the RPF [the exiled rebel army mainly of Tutsis], who he thought would be killing Hutus like himself. When the massacres of Tutsis began he decided to use it to hide Tutsis."