Rwanda

Area: 10,169 square miles
Population: 12,808,208
Capital: Kigali
Ethnic Groups: Hutu, 84%; Tutsi, 15%; Twa, 1%
Languages: Kinyarwanda (official), French (official), English (official), Kiswahili (official) Religions: Catholic, 57%; Protestant, 26%; Adventists,11%; Muslim, 5%; other, 1.8%
Life expectancy: 68.75 years
Literacy: 73.2%
Economy: Agriculture (coffee, tea, pyrethrum, livestock); Industry (mining of cassiterite and wolframite, tin, cement): Exports (coffee, tea, pyrethrum, livestock)
Gini (Income Inequality) Index: 43.7 (data from 2011; comp.US=41.1)
Gender Inequality Index: 0.388 (Highest level of improvement in Africa; comp. US=0.204 Very High)

Ancient Pathways

Part of the territory of earliest Twa-speaking hunter-gatherers and Great Lakes Bantu-speaking peoples, the land of modern Rwanda has been dominated by complex narratives of migration, shifting identities, and conflicts over power and territory. Historical linguists now agree that the ancestors of the speakers of Great Lakes Bantu arrived from West Africa (from the area of today's Nigeria), interacted with Cushitic and Sudanic (Nilo-Saharan) groups, and over thousands of years spread further east and southwards. Urewe-ware pottery associated with iron technology dates to between 600 BCE and 200 CE, when language and material culture were used locally to mark distinctive social identities. By 500 CE, ancient Iron Age peoples were living around the Great Lakes and practicing mixed agriculture emphasizing cattle, bananas, root crops, and grains, together with hunting and fishing. Within the next millennium, the pursuits of herders and farmers left their imprint on the local forests and became associated with traditions of kingship and healing, employing strategies that found multiple pathways to power.

State Systems, Violence, and Healing

Small kingdoms began to emerge in the 15th century, including some comprised of Hutu and Tutsi, the Western Lakes groups that figure in the ancestry of most modern Rwandans. Centralization provided protection from raids during the 16th and 17th centuries, as Tutsi cattle herders demanded tribute from Hutu peasant farmers and an economic caste system emerged despite their common ethnic ancestry. Nonetheless, the boundaries of social identity remained fluid and primarily economic rather than inherited ethnic categories. Between 1894 and 1918, Rwanda was part of German East Africa. German propaganda promoted the idea that the Tutsi ruling class was racially superior. The cattle disease (rinderpest) of the 1890s and the 1916-18 famine ravaged the region and altered the implications of farmer/herder social identities. The Treaty of Versailles that ended World War I in Europe, left the control over Rwanda and Burundi in the hands of the Belgians, who administered the territory as a UN mandate and instigated pass laws that further emphasized the permanence of Hutu and Tutsi identities.

Preceding independence, what some witnesses have described as a Belgian-sponsored revolution converted ethnic tension into a series of massacres in 1959-60. After independence in 1962, Rwanda experienced what Congolese historian Jacques Depelchin has called "the colonizing practices of divide and rule [that] created the conditions for extreme violence."[1] Backed by the Belgians, Grégoire Kayibanda, a Hutu politician, briefly headed the government but instigated a policy of regionalism, excluding northerners. A coup led by a northern Hutu political leader Juvénal Habyarimana toppled it

[1] Jacques Depelchin, "The making and unmaking of permanent minorities," *Africa is a Country* (May 26, 2012) https://africasacountry.com/2021/05/the-making-and-unmaking-of-permanent-minorities

and established a one-party state in the 1980s. Ethnic violence simmered, finally giving way to media calls for scapegoating exiled Tutsi enemies (called "inyenzi" or "cockroaches" by Hutu and blamed for the country's economic woes). In 1994, a plane carrying President Habyarimana and the new President of Burundi was shot down over Kigali months after a peace agreement with Tutsis had been negotiated, signaling for the genocide to commence. Once again, the United Nations came into play. When Secretary-General Kofi Annan commissioned a report on the 1994 events that culminated in the Rwandan genocide, the report concluded that the UN failed Rwanda in deplorable ways "ignoring evidence that a genocide was planned, refusing to act once it was underway, and abandoning the Rwandan people when they most needed protection."[2] More than 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus were killed within 100 days, while millions fled the country.

It may very well be that healing from this tragedy will require a global perspective since Rwanda's history and origins have transcended modern state boundaries and local village tribunals (*gacaca*) were relatively ineffective at closing the genocide's wounds. In the 21st century, economic recovery has benefitted from international investment resulting in remarkable increases in GDP. In other efforts to build a culture of reconciliation after Rwanda's genocide against the Tutsi, the government created a monthly day of service known as *Umuganda*. The program required every able-bodied Rwandan citizen between the ages of 18 and 65 to take part in community service for three hours once a month. This compulsory work is considered emblematic of a broader culture of reconciliation, development, and social control asserted by the government, which includes the paradox of President Paul Kagame's populist political grip that has erased dissent since 2000, and a national parliament in which women members comprise 64 percent of the total. In 2004, Eric Kabera founded the Rwanda Cinema Centre, which runs the annual film festival. He also established a film institute to promote, support, and teach filmmaking to Rwandans. Time will tell whether any of the gains in the past three decades can break the silences of the longer past, but a growing number of Rwandan filmmakers are using film to pay tribute to survivor and victim alike. As another witness and survivor of the Holocaust, Elie Wiesel, has argued, memory may be the only answer to international indifference.

Further Reading and Viewing

Brown, Alanna, dir. 2021. *Trees of Peace.* (USA, 97 mins.). Feature film by the African American director, distributed by Netflix.

Depelchin, Jacques. 2005. *Silences in African History: Between the syndromes of discovery and abolition.* Dar es Salaam: Mkuki na Nyota Publishers.

Kabera, Eric, dir. 2006. *Keeper of Memory/Gardiens de la Mémoire.* (Rwanda, 54 mins.).

Kazibwe, Andrew I. 2019. "Rwandan filmmakers paying tribute to a dark past," *The East African* (April 19, 2019). https://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/tea/magazine/rwandan-filmmakers-paying-tribute-to-a-dark-past-1416288

Peck, Raoul, dir. 2005. *Sometimes in April* (France, Rwanda, United States, 140 mins.). Distributed by HBO.

[2] Winfield, Nicole, "UN Failed Rwanda," *Global Policy Forum* (December 16, 1999). https://archive.globalpolicy.org/component/content/article/201-rwanda/39240.html