

S.U  
04/15/2014

**RWANDA, BUILD ON YOUR CULTURE, DON'T ABANDON IT.**

This

to

This



This

NOT  
to

This



(Kigali City Tower - Rwanda)

“After colonization, the West barged in on the history of the African societies with a barrage of new realities: ways of thinking and lifestyles, the state and power structure, schools, medicines, currencies, industrial products, etc., history takes large steps and today’s African societies are more than ever Euro African bi-cultural societies” (Kidiri 4)

### **Does development in Rwanda mean westernization?**

Like the African linguistic specialist, Marcel Kidiri wrote in the above quote, colonization in Africa and particularly in Rwanda introduced several good ideas and things like formal education and new technology. However the main damage it did was to denigrate and ridicule the Rwandan cultural practices as primitive. There were many measures to stop these practices, and those who obliged with these measures preserved their lives and/or were rewarded. “The Belgian colonial government entrusted to the Catholic Church which immediately fought the traditional religion (pagan) based on the cult *Kiranga* and did everything possible to weaken and remove the Rwandan theocracy” (Leclerc). There was about a two generation period of not practicing these traditions and some were not even passed on to the next generations. Despite the damage, can the old traditions be revived? The Oxford Dictionary defines culture as “The customs, arts, social institutions, and achievements of a particular nation, people, or other social group” (Culture). Culture is a very broad term because it deals with every practice of a given group of people. This paper will focus on language, music, arts & crafts and architecture.

According to much of the international media, most publications about Africa in general are about how impoverished many people are and the disasters there. There's hardly any publication and appreciation for the different cultures and traditional practices in the African countries. There's a constant bombardment of how the model of development is based on a western country with high industrialization, cities, wealth per capita. etc. An example of this is the definition of modernization/development theory by a famous American economist Walt

Rostow who was also an Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs in 1960s. “ The term modernization theory states that development in developing worlds can be attained through following the processes of development that are used by currently developed nations (Rostow)”. This can be interpreted as, for a country to develop, it has to do what “developed” countries do, which is basically copying their culture. The criteria for categorizing developed and undeveloped countries is based on such a model. What is not considered is that different cultures value different aspects of development; for example what is considered wealth in one culture may not be in the other. The pressure to develop based on the biased global criteria is influencing some African countries like Rwanda to slowly get rid of their cultural icons and adopt this western model.

Culture should be a distinguishing aspect among people and that uniqueness should be preserved. It's perplexing to imagine all global cultures bound into a similar culture; the world wouldn't be an interesting place, and there would be no curiosity in visiting other societies of the world where one is not from. However, currently, countries are more connected than ever especially in terms of trade. This is referred to as globalization. Therefore it's inevitable for cultures to acquire new ideas from each other, and this is advantageous if handled correctly. The question is, how can the ideas and things introduced to Rwanda during colonization and currently during globalization help to improve but not completely change and degrade the tradition?

Rwanda has a rich culture and history. Tragedies of the 1994 genocide unfortunately overshadow so much of this vibrant and relevant culture from being publicized. Today a different sort of violence is happening to the Rwandan people. It's not a physical violence but a

destruction and marginalization of traditions. Language, architecture, music, traditional institutions and more are slowly being abandoned by political leaders and citizens in an effort to “keep up with the Joneses” so that Rwanda is also viewed as developed. Development however is being interpreted as westernization, and this devalues the Rwandan culture. Westernization in this paper is defined as a conversion to European or North American traditions with little or no remainder of the former customs. Rwandans gain from such ways of developing but they lose more. In spite of this, some action is being taken in particular sectors to revive traditions, so Rwandans need to keep doing those hopeful actions and expand them to all sectors.

### **Pre-colonial History until 1994**

Before colonization, Rwanda was a kingdom and the king was referred to as *umwami*. The kingship was hereditary but the king didn't govern alone. Closest to the king was a group of advisers, and in each district of the country, there was a pasture leader, a land head and a military leader. The king often socialized with the citizens through several activities like: dance ceremonies- *amaraba*, poetry- *kwivuga*, and sports like high jumping- *gusimbuka urukiramende*. Rwanda being a homogeneous country, all Rwandans spoke Kinyarwanda, which greatly facilitated communication and unity among people. The Rwandan architecture comprised of round shaped houses that were grass thatched. These were called *nyakatsi*. The good regulation of temperature by these houses not only kept the occupants comfortable, but also preserved food.

The Rwandan society was specialized based on social classes to produce various products, and barter trade would be done afterward to acquire what one didn't have. The social classes were: Tutsi, Hutu and Twa. The Tutsi were the cattle keepers, the Hutu were the farmers, and the Twa were the artisans making the necessary domestic materials. These materials were

mostly clay. The Tutsi also made domestic containers particularly for milk, but instead of clay, these were curved from wood or hollowed then dried calabash squash. The containers include: *inkongoro*, *ibyansi*, *ibisabo* and *ibicuma*. The Tutsi were usually the wealthiest and the elite, but one could work his or her way up to become a Tutsi. According to the African Studies Center at the University of Pennsylvania, by using the *ubuhake* or client-patron system, a Tutsi would grant cattle and land usage to a Hutu or Twa indentured servant in exchange for agricultural products and personal service (Rwanda - History). When the Hutu accumulated enough wealth, he or she would then become a Tutsi and employ a Hutu or Twa. *Ubuhake* was a form of barter trade.

Illustrations of some traditional containers mentioned above.

Rwanda was first colonized by the Germans in 1899, but this was short lived as Germany lost all her colonies in 1919 after World War I (Rwanda - History). Rwanda was then given to Belgium as a colony. The main influence Germany had on Rwanda was the introduction of the Catholic church and the enforced abolition of the traditional cult *Kiranga*. Research done by Laval University noted that “By 1930, more than 90% of Rwandans were already converted to the Catholic religion” (Leclerc). The church was a political, social and economic tool. The church helped build some hospitals and schools but the biggest drive was economic. There were bible teachings like “Love your neighbor as you love yourself” which was broken down to “Work for your neighbor like you'd like to be worked for”. The neighbor in this case was everyone including the colonialists. With this, the Germans were able to reap a lot of resources from Rwanda especially coffee.

With the arrival of the Belgian colonialists in 1919, they manipulated the social system to divide and conquer the Rwandans so as to gain resources from Rwanda. The Belgian colonialists accomplished this task through two main ways: the identity card, and giving one group privileges at the expense of the others. “Belgians imposed identity card (1933-1934) with reference to the ethnic Tutsi or Hutu, which had the effect of reinforcing the social distinction between the two ethnic groups” (Leclerc). Shockingly, the identity card assigned a person to a specific ethnic group based on the size of his or her nose. The previous changeable social classes: Tutsi, Hutu and Twa became the permanent ethnic groups. Given that Rwandans were a unified people without different ethnic groups before, this was a disastrous change. It was forced onto them mostly using better weapons, so there was little or no choice.

The Tutsi were chosen over the rest because most of them were already the elites and they could be better used in the administration process. The Tutsi were given various advantages like being made supervisors ,while the Hutus were assigned to work on plantations or construction sites. As if that wasn't enough, the Tutsi were obligated to act harshly upon their fellow Rwandans as a catalyst of the division: “Tutsi were ordered to whip the Hutu, otherwise they could get whipped themselves by the Belgian colonists” (Leclerc). The Hutu however viewed the situation as if the Tutsi were turning against them, as opposed to understanding that the colonialists were forcing them to do so. The Hutu believed that the Tutsi should have rebelled more against the colonialists. The long term result of this was the 1994 genocide. This was a terrible tragedy but it shouldn't be the only thing people know about Rwanda. Meanwhile, some fundamental identifiers of the Rwandan culture are slowly but surely diminishing. All the leaders and citizens of Rwanda want for the country is to develop, but how to do that is a dilemma at

present.

### **Language - Why Can't I Speak My Native Tongue?**

Language is a very crucial aspect of culture and without it, a culture is doomed. This is the reason why when one group wants to destroy the culture of another, one of the aspects of culture attacked is language. Take for example the case with the Native Americans. An article by the National Museum of the American Indian shows that “Families were often forced to send their children to Boarding schools, where they were forbidden to speak their Native languages” (Struggling with Cultural Repression). During boarding schools, Indian children were punished for using their native languages and the teachers humiliated their traditions which led to a gradual decline in the continual practice of the cultural norms. A similar process is happening with Kinyarwanda in Rwandan schools today although it's still in the early stages.

In Rwanda, formal education was introduced and strongly enforced by the Belgian colonialists (Leclerc). The language of instruction in the schools was French with Kinyarwanda used for translation. After colonization, the French school system remained. French became an official language and Kinyarwanda a national language. Later, the genocide against the Tutsi caused many Rwandans to flee as refugees to neighboring countries like Uganda where the official language was English. “The return of 850,000 former Tutsi refugees from the period of independence, returned to Uganda and other countries, has led to social-cultural imbalances as their second language was not French but English” (Leclerc). This re-emergence of many English speaking former refugees caused English to be regarded as a second official language. Nevertheless, most schools remained in a French school system with a few private schools having an English school system.

Although Kinyarwanda is taught in schools and students need to take exams on it, it is not the language of instruction, meaning that all the other subjects are taught in foreign languages which are French or English. Students are told to use these foreign languages even outside of class as a way of making them become fluent in them, and in the long run promoting global communication. Being able to speak to people around the world is seen as essential to the development of Rwanda. While I recognize global communication and world citizenship is important, I contend that knowledge and love of Kinyarwanda suffers because of the efforts to develop my country. In my primary school particularly, there was a punishment for those who spoke Kinyarwanda on campus. It was called a “stinky horn” and all the connotations you can imagine went with it. After a cow was butchered they saved a horn. It sat out in the sun and it rotted. It smelled awful. It was made into a necklace by passing a string into it, and a teacher would give it to a student he or she heard speaking Kinyarwanda outside the Kinyarwanda class. That student was to wear it wherever until he or she heard another student speaking Kinyarwanda then the horn would be given to that other student. At the end of the day, those that wore the horn were called by a staff member and made to kneel outside on gravel. Despite the pain from that, speaking Kinyarwanda still came naturally, and one would only speak English when talking to a teacher or when the person with the horn was close.

In order to make their children perform well in many classes, some Rwandan parents raise their children speaking either English or French alongside Kinyarwanda. This is because various subjects are taught in these languages and once a student is conversant in them, they have the core material and hence are most likely going to pass well the other subjects. Some other parents however were born as refugees in neighboring countries like Uganda, Democratic



Republic of Congo or Tanzania. Unlike Rwanda that has one language shared by the three tribes, these countries have a range of 50-120 tribes that use different languages. For Uganda particularly, research done by a Ugandan tourism company, My Uganda, shows that " Uganda is a home to many tribes that speak different languages. Uganda has 56 tribes and about nine indigenous communities" (Uganda Tribes and Languages). Therefore a foreign official and national language is chosen by the government, because choosing one local one would show favoritism to that particular tribe. When the Rwandan refugees from such countries returned to Rwanda after the genocide, they knew little or no Kinyarwanda, so they raised their children without speaking Kinyarwanda.

The biggest argument for teaching in a foreign language-based education system is to enable Rwanda compete globally by easing international communication. Is this goal being met? According to a Rwandan newspaper, The New Times, during the 2014 Miss Rwanda auditions, many capable contestants including those from distinguished schools were put to public shame, because of their inability to express their answers in grammatically correct English or French (Akintore). The contestants were required to answer one question in Kinyarwanda, and two more in French or English. This failure shows that many students cram to pass school work that is given in these foreign languages, but when they are put in a situation where they need to give their own ideas, they fail or don't do it well.

On the other hand, there are countries with a highly successful education system which have a national local language like Rwanda that they apply as a foundation for their education. Foreign languages are also taught as a class so that the students could then transfer the learned concepts into these languages if need be. "Countries like Sweden, China and Russia teach

foreign languages with national language proficiency examinations but still preserve education for their native languages” (Akintore). One of the main reasons why this kind of education system is successful is because the language of instruction is the students' first language, therefore, there's no language barrier preventing students from understanding concepts in various fields for example science. Like Nelson Mandela said “If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head, but if you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart”(Akintore). This means that one will retain information that was taught to him or her in a more familiar language than that that isn't. In general, although the Rwandan formal education system was introduced by foreigners during colonization, even after independence, Rwanda has not modified it. It is assumed that for her to develop a stable education system, it has to be identical to that in the western countries because they are the ones who introduced it in the first place.

### **Music and Fashion: Importing without Limits, Forgetting Traditions**

The effect of language extends to music. These days, Rwandan folk music is rarely played on the radio, television, or even at casual parties. Instead, a new kind of Kinyarwanda music that is influenced by foreign genres like Hip Hop, R&B has become the dominant one, with the current most popular Rwandan artists like Riderman, The Ben and Meddy. This shouldn't have been a bad thing because cultures adapt to modifications and the fact that most of the songs were in Kinyarwanda was great. However, the traditional dance, *Amaraba*, can hardly be danced to the songs in these new genres, meaning its popularity is inversely proportional to that of the new kind of Kinyarwanda music. As the new kind of Kinyarwanda music gains the spotlight, the traditional music and dance gradually lose it. Traditional Kinyarwanda music and

dance has evolved from being used for any sort of entertainment to being almost confined to ceremonies. It's usually played at weddings and other functions that involve a great deal of the older generations as the audience. Although the younger people do the dancing in such ceremonies, when they are alone - for example in youth parties, they usually dance to the foreign music and Rwandan new kind of music with no traditional dances.

Why doesn't Rwanda put limitations on such songs if they are interfering with her culture? The answer lies in the Opportunity Cost economic theory, which is defined by the Business Dictionary as “A benefit, profit or value of something that must be given up to acquire or achieve something else”. Colonization in Rwanda introduced a plantation system which was used to provide resources to the colonialists. After independence, this system had become so deeply rooted that it would be nearly impossible to eliminate completely. The cash crops that used to be planted on plantations were still grown, but exchanged to other countries for income that was used to rebuild the country. Such cash crops like coffee and tea are still grown until today, and the foreign exchange from them is a strong backbone for the Rwandan economy. A report from the US Trade Representative showed that “U.S. imports of agricultural products from Rwanda totaled \$30 million in 2011. Largest category: Coffee (unroasted) (\$28 million)” (Rwanda). Therefore, if Rwanda wants to maintain the trade relations with the Western countries who are the biggest importers of her cash crops, Rwanda can't risk to put sanctions on their products for example the music.

On the other hand, some countries like France have put a fraction of sanctions on foreign songs that can play on radios and televisions to preserve the market of local songs. Their main reason is because the external media can suffocate the internal ones. “For example, Hollywood

movies' market share runs 80%-90% in Latin America countries, but it dips below 50% in France and is broadly 60%-75% over Western Europe (Hopewell). If France has been successful in limiting other western country's media but still maintained trade with them, why can't Rwanda do it? This is because countries like France are economically stronger than Rwanda due to the possession of more resources unlike Rwanda that generally depends on agriculture. Therefore, it is easier for more economically powerful countries to preserve their culture than the weaker ones; but this doesn't mean it can't be done.

One may ask, why would it be important to preserve the popularity of traditional aspects like music, and dance? Research done by the international Cultural Survival Organization illustrates that "Because it can move them deeply, members of communities around the world use music to create cultural identity and to erase the cultural identity of others, to create unity and to dissolve it" (Seeger). Therefore, when one listens to his or her own traditional music often, he or she will not only be able to learn about the history of some norms, but will also be likely continue practicing those traditional norms. On the other hand, if a group of people from a given tradition don't care enough to fight for the survival of their traditional music, the international community may not care enough to even learn about the culture of such a group of people.

Importation of western music to Rwanda has greatly increased due to the improved standard of living that has enabled more people to afford televisions in addition to radios. A section of a biography of one of the famous Rwandan traditional music artists, Cecile Kayirebwa read, "Growing up in Rwanda, music was integral to daily family life... (I) was very familiar with the popular French songs (I) heard daily on the radio" (Kirenga). Cecile is sixty eight years

old as of 2014, illustrating that this phenomena has been happening for quite a while now. Most of the music currently imported is “pop” - with some common characteristics like: being sung in English or French, smoking, drinking alcoholic beverages, and objectification of women. Examples of these songs include “23” by Miley Cyrus or “Tonight I’m loving you” by Enrique Iglesias. With little or no moderation to incorporate the traditional folk music on the televisions and radios as well, the correlated effects of this music can be visible in some of today's Rwandan youth.

For leisure, more and more youth are switching from doing the traditional activities like: dancing *amaraba* (female dancing), *guhmiriza* (male dancing), playing the musical instruments like *inanga* and *kwivuga* (poetry) to smoking, and drinking alcoholic beverages. This is considered being modern.

In Rwanda, a recent study conducted by the Ministry of Youth, in collaboration with Kigali Health Institute (KHI), shows that close to 53% of the youth between 14 and 35 years of age had consumed one or more substances at least once in their life time. According to the Ministry of Health, in Ndera Neuropsychiatric Hospital, patients with alcohol and drugs induced mental illness who were received increased from about 23% in 2010 to about 30% in 2011 (Tasamba).

Traditionally, only elderly men usually thirty years of age and above are the ones who smoked and drank alcohol, therefore there’s still no strict drinking age laws in Rwanda. This means that teenagers nowadays can access alcoholic beverages and some of them are becoming addicts at a young age.

The Kinyarwanda music being produced currently by youth portrays similar characteristics as those of many imported western pop music. An example is the song “Nsobanurira by Sacha ft Bably” released in 2013. It is sung in Kinyarwanda, and it's about the lass asking the lad if he loves her. On one hand the song has a positive view illustrating that

females have started asking out males, unlike the stereotypical vice versa way. On the other hand female artist is wearing a bikini and is dancing on a bar. These acts are some of the taboos according to the Rwandan cultural norms, because a lady is supposed to show at most a quarter of skin and doesn't hang out in bars. Elder women can drink alcohol but from their homes.

The traditional wear - *Umushanana* accommodates the elegancy requirements of the dressing norms. However, through current observation, people from the generation that is around 70 years of age seem to be the last ones that wear *umushanana* everyday, the others wear it when there are ceremonies. This has been attributed to the large importation of cheaper second hand clothing from the western countries which suffocates the local textile industries. A report released by the US department of Commerce shows that “Used clothing is the largest U.S. export to Rwanda” (Used Clothing). While it is a good recycling process as well as kind of the exporting countries, it furthers cultural erosion in Rwanda.

#### Illustration of Rwandan female dancers in umushanana

Although there may be an argument that wearing however and whatever one wants as well drinking from wherever are people's freedoms, there are reasons why these norms and taboos were put there and passed on from generation to another. Taboos and norms are social laws of a community. In Rwanda, they are communicated orally, and although there's hardly any recordings of these, they've been the status quo for a long time. My mother received these oral transmissions from her by her mother and grandmother. I was told that one of the reasons was to prevent any unnecessary seduction and lack of control when a lady is drunk. It was and still is a big deal to keep one's virginity until marriage as a sign of a moral and respectful lady. Rape

happening before marriage is an unfortunate disaster- not that it wouldn't be after one is married". There were no contraceptives then so, the norms and taboos kept in check the levels of many outside of marriage unnecessary pregnancies and all that comes with them like STDs and AIDS.

The currently increased violation of these norms has led to many negative effects. Although there are contraceptives now, the idea of using them is not yet incorporated in the culture, so few people use them. This is illustrated in the rise in the number of teenage pregnancies. The Rwanda Focus Newspaper stated "Teenage mothers in Rwanda have been on the increase from 4% of girls between the ages of 10 and 18 in 2005 to close to 6% by 2010, according to a Gender Based Violence (GBV) report released on Thursday last week." (Karinganire). Since the idea of using contraceptives especially before marriage contradicts the cultural norm of being an honorable virgin bride, many teenagers still feel shy to even request for the contraceptives or be seen buying them. This all comes back to the significance of a society's culture, and shows that adopting a culture and custom of another place doesn't work in certain areas. In general, the scenario of the rapidly changing Kinyarwanda music and fashion due to the imported youth culture, does prove that there is indeed eroding cultural norms and taboos, and there are negative consequences of this.

### **Handicrafts: Practical Vs Decorative usage**

Handicrafts in Rwanda have been mainly for domestic usage therefore their presence in every household. The main Rwandan craft is the making of herbal medicines and home remedies. These are used for healing many non-fatal ailments, but their usage has dramatically reduced in the last decade. There's a claim that pharmaceuticals from the "developed countries" are better, so the local herbal medicines are slowly losing their market, especially in the cities. In

the rural areas where many of the herbalists are, some of their local leaders are putting up quite unattainable measures to squeeze out those herbalists. This is because the deeds of the cities are the aspirations of the rural areas. It would be unpopular and dramatic for a cultural practice that has been there for so long to be abruptly banned; that is why the use of restrictions is more effective.

In one of the interviews done by the Rwandan Herbal Treatment Advancement Organization in 2013, a herbalist called Augustin Nkizerunini who works from Rutsiro district (a rural area) said: “*Mu minsi ishize, uwo bemeraga ko ari umuvuzi bwite yabaga yatanze ibihumbi 120 ahwanye n’ibisabwa byose, kandi ayo mafaranga ibihumbi 120 akamara umwaka umwe, undi mwaka bakongera bagatanga andi*” (Rutsiro). This is interpreted as, “Recently, for one to become a legal herbalist, he or she had to pay 120,000 Rwandan Francs yearly”. This is about 176 US Dollars, a good deal of money considering the current GDP is \$1500 per year (CIA, The World Factbook - Rwanda). The money paid covers the herbalist certification documents and training about the health standards set by the Ministry of Health. Although this money goes to doing necessary things, it is a lot for an average person to afford.

The use of the herbal medicines and home remedies is important in Rwanda. Plants such as *umuravumba* (*Iboza riparia*), *igikakarubamba* (aloe vera) can be locally grown and used to heal various ailments for example cough, ring worms, etc. On the other hand, there are several diseases like polio, cancer whose herbal remedies haven’t been found out in Rwanda and pharmaceuticals help a great deal. Today, there's no industry producing pharmaceutical drugs in Rwanda, therefore all of the drugs are imported. There are several cases where there were delays in the arrival of imported pharmaceuticals and this greatly affects those that are dependent on



them even for curing the diseases the local remedies can cure. The Pharmaletter, an international newspaper about pharmaceutical industries reported that, “The delay in Apotex' export license resulted in a delay in Rwanda's access to the medicines supplied by the firm” (Royle). The company APOTEX produces drugs that reduce the impact of the HIV/AIDS. Although herbal medicines also can't cure AIDS, they can heal or reduce the impact of the symptoms like cough and ring worms. Therefore people use them, instead of suffering while waiting for the so called imported “better medicines”.

Another key handicraft is the making of everyday containers from locally available natural resources. Containers are made from local trees, plants, and clay like *ibisabo*, *inkongoro*, *ibibindi*, *ibiseke*, *ibyansi*. Currently, these containers are made in miniscule amounts mostly for tourism purposes, ceremonial functions like weddings and decoration. Most of them have been replaced by China, metallic objects or plastics like Jerry Cans similar to those in the “developed” countries. Few people still plant, curve or mold these containers. There are no natural sources of metal known so far in Rwanda, and there’s still underdeveloped industrialization to make good quality plastics. This means that these products are being imported, hence less self-sufficiency that did once provide cultural and economic benefits. Is it worth it to import these new products yet there are local products that perform the same functions? Rwanda still has a large illiterate rural population who can’t be able to read the written safety directions on these foreign products. A common direction on the plastics is not using them for hot foods. Since toddlers are bound to break China and metallics would get too hot for them, they are usually served food on plastic plates and hot porridge or tea in plastic cups. The food is obviously left to cool before it is eaten. Traditionally, containers for food are curved out of trees or from hollowed calabashes, so

toddlers didn't face this situation.

Plastic objects are hardened by a chemical known as Bisphenol A or BPA, which is an estrogen mimicking compound. When used for carrying very hot foods, the chemical has been proven to leak into the food. Heavy exposure to this chemical is dangerous; "FDA have some concern about the potential effects of BPA on the brain, behavior, and prostate gland in fetuses, infants, and young children" (Bisphenol A). In addition to this, plastics are not biodegradable while the traditional containers are. Although the plastics can be recycled, often, they end up in the trash and this degrades the beauty of the Rwandan environment. Looking at the larger picture, Rwandans are spending unnecessary money on importing these new products all in the name of development. Many local handicrafts are currently for decoration other than for practical usage. However of the two handicrafts mentioned above, the making of local containers and equipment is the one that is close to extinction, and therefore needs immediate attention.

### **Architecture**

One other unique aspect of the Rwandan culture is the traditional way of building houses known as *nyakatsi* also referred to as huts. They are round, and made from poles, clay walls usually decorated with patterns, and thatched with tightly woven dry grass or banana leaves. A house is divided into rooms and floored with mats made out of papyrus grass. Several houses make up one home. The presence of these houses however has greatly diminished especially due to the 2008 campaign by the government to get rid of them as a step towards "Development". The BBC news noted that "The Rwandan government has given itself until the end of May 2011 to enforce their anti-thatch campaign" (Attwood). This campaign mobilized those who were financially able to abolish the *nyakatsi* and roof their houses with either iron sheets or roof tiles.

Those who weren't able to afford that were given materials from the government, and through the community service called *umuganda*, the experienced neighbors helped build the house. This community service includes other activities and it is a duty for every community member which is performed every last Saturday of every month. According to the agenda of the Ministry of Local Affairs in Rwanda, “The campaign aims at allowing all Rwandans to get access to decent home, thus enabling the Government to reorganize the rural settlement for social and economic transformation” (Minaloc programs). This is among the plans in the larger agenda which is the Development Vision of 2020 that Rwanda has given herself.

#### Illustration of the *Nyakatsi* vs Iron roofed house

There were many reactions towards the anti-thatch campaign. The commonest negative reaction was that the residents who were moved from the *nyakatsi* complained that the iron roofed houses were poor regulators of heat. One of the residents I interviewed named Rutsinda Emmanuel said, “Although the government thinks it was doing us good by moving us into the so-called modern houses, I still prefer my *nyakatsi* because on hot days, it was cool and in cold nights, it stayed warm”. Rwanda’s climate is divided into dry and wet seasons, and the average temperature is 70°F all year round (Rwanda: Seasons and Climate). Due to the nice weather and minimum mechanization many Rwandans don't have air-conditioning. Nevertheless, the iron roofed houses get really uncomfortable at certain times of the day yet the *nyakatsi* rarely did, because metal is a better conductor of heat than grass. On the other hand, these houses provided decent housing especially for the vulnerable like the elderly and disabled who couldn't improve or repair their *nyakatsi*. However, what if the campaign was huts to better huts instead of huts to

iron roofed houses, what would have been different? How could it have benefited the Rwandan culture?

### **Glimmers of Hope**

While there are several critical aspects of culture that are vulnerable at the moment, there are others which are still striving and excelling, these are the glimmers of hope. One of the main ones is the *Gacaca* court system. *Gacaca* courts are community courts inspired by tradition. According to a UN report, there were 120, 000 people accused of committing crimes during the genocide (The Gacaca Court System). The Gacaca courts were re-enforced in 2001 to speed up the work of the judicial courts who were overwhelmed by all these cases on top of the non-genocide ones. According to a presentation given during the Truth Commission and Commissions of Inquiry around the world, “From December 1996 to December 2006, the courts managed to try about 10,000 suspects (Human Rights Watch 2004, 18): at that rate it would take another 110 years to prosecute all the prisoners” (Contreras-Chavez).

Historically, the Gacaca courts settled village or family disputes. Examples of these disputes included: theft, marital issues, land rights, and property damage. The villagers would elect honest elders to preside over the cases. The cases were resolved in front of the people so that they would also contribute. The main job of the courts was to promote reconciliation and justice. Between 2001 and 2012 when the Gacaca courts were resolving the genocide cases, the main aim of achieving reconciliation and justice as well as resolving the cases before the community members was still the same, but the process was made a little more complex. The people elected by individual communities to preside over the cases were given basic judicial training, and there was a limited degree of crime they could judge. The Gacaca court system was

divided into three hierarchies so that the decision from one could be appealed to another. This enabled more accuracy and reliability.

The application of the Gacaca court system has been remarkably advantageous in the process of administering justice to the many suspects awaiting in prisons for sentencing. The UN noted that “More than 12,000 community-based courts tried more than 1.2 million cases throughout the country” (Gacaca Court System). There was an opportunity for the genocide criminals to show remorse before their communities, ask for forgiveness, and ideally reconcile with the victim’s family. Many of these accused people who confessed were given shorter punishments like community service which both improved their communities and cut down the government’s prison budget. Since the Gacaca court system was re-established, it has been a great way of reviving culture.

Secondly is the citizen's duty of participating in the *Umuganda* translated as community service. The Rwanda Government Board states that, “In Rwanda, there is a mandatory community service day from 8:00am to 11:00am, on the last Saturday of each month called Umuganda” (Umuganda). This is done by physically-able adults and is supervised by the an administrator called *Nyumbakumi*. He or she is the leader of an administration based on a ten household arrangement. It is the lowest level of government in Rwanda. *Umuganda* is a traditional and informal act that has been there for centuries to promote solidarity and individual support to nation-building, but it later became an official law on 02/07/1974 (Community Work-Umuganda).

Aside from the encroaching on peoples' weekend time, the benefits are many. Activities range from cleaning streets and trimming bushes along roads, to repairing public facilities and

building houses for the vulnerable. Also, it is a great time for mingling with community members and raising any issues to the administrators. Statistics show that, “The value of *Umuganda* to the country’s development since 2007 has been estimated at more than US \$60 million” (Community Work-Umuganda). These efforts have also made the BBC to rank Rwanda’s capital city - Kigali as the cleanest in Africa (BBC Report on Kigali City). The efforts of building on the traditions through the *umuganda* program are indeed paying off.

The Rwandan tradition of individual contribution to nation-building extends to the medical sector. In Rwanda, everyone contributes depending on their income to the national and universal health insurance called *mutuelle de sante* which was launched in 1999 (Mutuel de Sante, Rwanda). The premium for the middle class income earners is \$2 per year while that for the wealthiest is \$8 per year. The government pays premium for the poorest in the country, who are 25%. Data from Center for Health and Market - an international organization that promotes quality and affordable health care in disadvantaged countries shows that,

There are two facets to the benefits package. The Minimum Package of Activities (MPA) covers all services and drugs provided at the health centers including pre- and post-natal care, vaccinations, family planning, minor surgical operations, and essential and generic drugs. The Complementary Package of Activities (CPA) covers a limited number of services at the district hospitals, including the cost of hospitalization, caesarian operations, minor and major surgical operations, medical imaging, and all diseases afflicting children ages 0 to 5 years. As of 2006, the CPA benefits package was extended to cover select services in national hospitals. Coverage has increased from 1% in 2000 to 90% in 2009 (Mutuel de Sante, Rwanda).

The effects of *Mutuel de sante* are remarkable. The New York Times quoted, “Andrew Makaka, who manages the health financing unit at the Ministry of Health, said that only 4% of Rwandans are uninsured” (Rosenberg). Also, the program has enabled the spread of doctors throughout the country as opposed to the concentration of many of them in cities which was the case before.

Other countries should therefore borrow a leaf from Rwanda's excellent job on expanding her culture in sectors like the medical field that has managed to insure 96% Rwandans.

More hope comes through the idea of national pride through several patriotism programs, the largest and most influential currently being the *Agaciro* Development Fund/AgDF. The official website for Agaciro Development Fund defines it as voluntary donations given mainly by Rwandans themselves for the sustainable development of the country (Agaciro Development Fund). This was launched by president Paul Kagame in 2012, after a period of being frustrated by foreign aid. Rwandans in and out of the country have been given channels through which they can contribute voluntarily in building their country and the amount doesn't matter. The Funds are managed by AgDF Corporate Trust Ltd who present financial reports annually, and they are audited by the Ministry of Finance and Economic planning. Massive campaigns are held throughout the country, and there's one big annual meeting where ordinary people get to suggest projects they would like the money to be spent on. A Rwandan newspaper, The New Times reported that, at the launching of AgDF, "Over Rwf1.2 billion (2 million US Dollars) were raised immediately" (Kagame Launches Agaciro Development Fund). This money has not only been used for developmental programs that were previously left undone due to insufficient national budget and/or delays in foreign aid, but helped to instill the feeling of self worth among Rwandans.

Moving on, since 2012, the Institute of the National Museums of Rwanda/INMR has been hosting a cultural event called *Holidays in Museums* for children aged 10 – 15 years old during the longest break from school. The INMR official website states that "This program was designed to cultivate, promote and conserve cultural values among the young generation"

(Holidays in Museums for the Second Time). This is a two weeks long camp-like event that takes place at various museums. Since the launching of the program until the last event in 2013, the venues have been only in the capital city – Kigali. Some of the activities taught include: traditional dancing, drumming, making traditional music, riddles, games and general norms and taboos in the Rwandan culture. According to a Rwandan Newspaper, *Igihe*, during the second time it was hosted, 150 children attended the event. One of the interviewed students – Uwase Fiona said, “*Turasaba ko ingoro ndangamurage yakwagura ibi bikorwa mu turere twose tw’igihugu, bityo abana bose bakabasha kumenya umuco nyarwanda kugira ngo dukure turi Intore zibereye u Rwanda*” (Nzirabera). This is translated as, “I request that this program may be expanded to all districts in the country so that all children may be able to learn the culture of Rwanda then we'll all grow up to be good citizens.” Such a program is a productive way of revitalizing the culture among the children who are the future of Rwanda.

### **Conclusion**

Being a Rwandan, living in Rwanda during a time period where culture seems to be changing rapidly, it’s appealing to me to unravel the consequences of this. Culture is always changing, adapting to new things and losing some, it’s important to regulate this so that the aspects that could tolerate new ideas are distinguished from those that should be kept constant. These new ideas were introduced by colonization and others are being introduced by increased globalization. However, when the change is happening too fast, sometimes people don’t get to think twice about regulations, hence the reason this is so important. Some of the symbols of the Rwandan culture like the traditional language, houses, music, handicrafts and architecture are on the verge of marginalization because there's a great push to becoming like the ideal



developed/western countries.

When there's mere duplicating of what another country is doing, the copying country almost always lags behind because it is beginning what the other is already ahead in. An example would be the use of imported chemical pesticides for farming. Pietra Rivoli, a professor of finance and international business at Georgetown University wrote during her analysis of pesticides to Africa that, “Most of the farmers are illiterate, and when they are blessed with pesticides or fertilizers, they often send their children barefoot down the rows of the toxic chemicals, or prepare food or carry water with the same implements that were used to spread and carry the poison” (Rivoli 65). It’s good to learn from other countries in order to build on the traditional way of doing things, but Rivoli shows that it’s deeper than just duplicating the surface results.

There's no way one can ignore the fact that new foreign ideas in Rwanda have led to a great improvement in several areas like the complexities in the medical field. The main problem here is that the society isn't yet suited to deal with some new ideas. There are preparations the society needs to do in order to successfully adopt another concept from a different culture. It is critical to only adopt ideas that will help build on the tradition; for example, if the US discovers cement, Rwanda could import it and use it to build stronger huts instead of building skyscrapers like those on the US. One way this can be effective is by teaching Rwandan students the core information of various subjects in sciences and arts using their mother tongue – Kinyarwanda. Additional foreign languages classes should be offered so that the learned knowledge could then be transferred into these languages if need be. This has worked for prosperous countries like China, Sweden and Russia so there's no reason for Rwanda not doing it.

Countries should not be categorized as poor or rich, undeveloped or developed because their cultures are different. The criteria for determining this should be varying from culture to culture depending on what is considered as wealth. It's like comparing oranges and apples. Constant referring to a given country through several media as underdeveloped or poor kills the traditional spirit especially if the same media doesn't take time to appreciate the cultural icons of that country. To boost their morale, the leaders and citizens of such a place may start rethinking a different model of running things usually copied from that of the countries that are usually praised of as being developed.

What if the thing most publicized about Rwanda wasn't the genocide only, but also the use of a traditionally influenced policy *Gacaca* court system, that enabled Rwanda to solve more than 120, 000 genocide cases in 6-7 years? It would have taken 110 years using the mostly known judicial system. What if it was about the policy *umuganda*, that has made Kigali city the cleanest in Africa? What if it was about the health insurance program *mutuel de sante*, that has managed to insure 96% of Rwandans? What if it was the *agaciro* development fund that has motivated Rwandans to donate billions of money to their country instead of solely depending on foreign aid? Maybe then, Rwanda would be more proud and careful not to give up beneficial traditions to adopt the mostly publicized western ones.

#### Works Cited

Akintore, Aline "Commentary." *Of Beauty Queens, Kinyarwanda and Rwanda' s Education System*. N.p., n.d. Web. 07 Feb. 2014.

<<http://www.newtimes.co.rw/news/index.php?i=15623&a=74239>>.

Attwood, *BBC News*. BBC, n.d. Web. 17 Jan. 2014.

<<http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/africahaveyoursay/2011/05/should-modernisation-be-forced.shtml>>.

"BBC Report about Kigali City - Rwanda Aviation and Tourism News,." *BBC Report about Kigali City - Rwanda Aviation and Tourism News,*. N.p., n.d. Web. 15 Apr. 2014. <<http://www.rwandan-flyer.com/places-to-visit-in-kigali-city>>.

World FactBook - Rwanda *Central Intelligence Agency*. Central Intelligence Agency, n.d. Web. 06 Apr. 2014. <<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/rw.html>>.

"Community Work – Umuganda | NEW DAWN ASSOCIATES." *NEW DAWN ASSOCIATES*. N.p., n.d. Web. 23 Mar. 2014. <<http://newdawnassociates.com/new/special-interest/rwanda-initiatives/community-work-umuganda/>>.

Contreras-Chavez, Angela "Day2 Intro Truth Commissions World." *Day2 Intro Truth Commissions World*. N.p., n.d. Web. 21 Mar. 2014. <<http://pt.slideshare.net/verapax/day2-intro-truth-commissions-world>>.

"Compulsory Licensing and Access to Drugs - the Rwanda Experience by Matthew Royle." *Compulsory Licensing and Access to Drugs*. N.p., n.d. Web. 21 Mar. 2014. <<http://www.thepharmaletter.com/article/compulsory-licensing-and-access-to-drugs-the-rwanda-experience-by-matthew-royle>>.

"Definition of Culture in English:." *Culture: Definition of Culture in Oxford Dictionary (American English) (US)*. N.p., n.d. Web. 08 Apr. 2014. <[http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american\\_english/culture](http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/culture)>.

Hopewell, John "Hollywood Stymied as Europe Sticks With Its Limits on Film and TV." *Variety*. N.p., n.d. Web. 04 Apr. 2014. <<http://variety.com/2013/film/international/hollywood-stymied-as-europe-sticks-with-its-limits-on-film-and-tv-1200497446/>>.

Karinganire, Eric "Teenage Pregnancies on the Rise." *The Rwanda Focus*. N.p., n.d. Web. 21 Mar. 2014. <<http://focus.rw/wp/2013/05/teenage-pregnancies-on-the-rise/>>.

Kidiri, Marcel "NOVES SL. SUMMER 2001. OVERVIEW OF THE SOCIOLINGUISTIC SITUATION IN AFRICA (4)." *NOVES SL. SUMMER 2001. OVERVIEW OF THE SOCIOLINGUISTIC SITUATION IN AFRICA (4)*. N.p., n.d. Web. 17 Jan. 2014. <[http://www6.gencat.net/llengcat/noves/hm01estiu/internacional/a\\_diki4\\_6.htm](http://www6.gencat.net/llengcat/noves/hm01estiu/internacional/a_diki4_6.htm)>.

Kirenga "Soul Of Rwanda." *Creative Africa Network* -. N.p., n.d. Web. 21 Mar. 2014. <<http://www.creativeafricanetwork.com/page/13910/en>>.

Leclerc, Jacques "Rwanda." *Rwanda*. N.p., n.d. Web. 30 Mar. 2014.

<http://www.axl.cefan.ulaval.ca/afrique/rwanda.htm>>.

Minaloc Programs "Bye Bye Nyakatsi." *Bye Bye Nyakatsi*. N.p., n.d. Web. 07 Apr. 2014.  
<<http://www.minaloc.gov.rw/index.php?id=514>>.

"My Uganda." *My Uganda*. N.p., n.d. Web. 28 Feb. 2014.  
<<http://myuganda.co.ug/uganda-tribes-and-languages/>>.

Tasamba, James "National." *EAC Cited as Transit Route for Drugs*. N.p., n.d. Web. 30 Mar. 2014. <<http://www.newtimes.co.rw/news/index.php?i=15043&a=55535>>.

Struggling with Cultural Repression "Native Words Native Warriors." *Native Words Native Warriors*. N.p., n.d. Web. 25 Feb. 2014.  
<<http://nmai.si.edu/education/codetalkers/html/chapter3.html>>.

"News & Events." *Bisphenol A (BPA): Use in Food Contact Application*. N.p., n.d. Web. 27 Feb. 2014. <<http://www.fda.gov/newsevents/publichealthfocus/ucm064437.htm>>.

Kirenga "Soul Of Rwanda." *Creative Africa Network* -. N.p., n.d. Web. 21 Mar. 2014.  
<<http://www.creativeafricanetwork.com/page/13910/en>>.

Rivoli, Pietra. *The Travels of a T-shirt in the Global Economy*. Hoboken (N.J.): Wiley, 2009. Print.

Rosenberg, Tina "In Rwanda, Health Care Coverage That Eludes the U.S." *Opinionator In Rwanda Health Care Coverage That Eludes the US Comments*. N.p., n.d. Web. 24 Apr. 2014.  
[http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/07/03/rwandas-health-care-miracle/?\\_php=true&\\_type=blogs&\\_r=0](http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/07/03/rwandas-health-care-miracle/?_php=true&_type=blogs&_r=0)

"Rostow's Theory of Modernization Development." *Academia.edu*. N.p., n.d. Web. 24 Apr. 2014.  
<[http://www.academia.edu/3596310/Rostows\\_theory\\_of\\_modernization\\_development](http://www.academia.edu/3596310/Rostows_theory_of_modernization_development)>.

"Rutsiro : Abavuzi Gakondo Ntibavuga Rumwe N'ubuyobozi Bwabo Ku Mafaranga Basabwa Gutanga." *Ubuwuzi*. N.p., n.d. Web. 21 Mar. 2014. <<http://www.ubuwuzi.com/carous/rutsiro-abavuzi-gakondo-ntibavuga-rumwe-nubuyobozi-bwabo-ku-mafaranga-basabwa-gutanga/>>.

The Gacaca Court System "Rwanda, Genocide, Hutu, Tutsi, Mass Execution, Ethnic Cleansing, Massacre, Human Rights, Victim Remembrance, Education, Africa." *UN News Center*. UN, n.d. Web. 21 Mar. 2014. <<http://www.un.org/en/preventgenocide/rwanda/about/bgjustice.shtml>>.

Rwanda - History "East Africa Living Encyclopedia." *East Africa Living Encyclopedia*. N.p., n.d. Web. 31 Mar. 2014. <<http://www.africa.upenn.edu/NEH/rwhistory.htm>>.

"Rwanda." *Office of the United States Trade Representative*. N.p., n.d. Web. 21 Mar. 2014. <<http://www.ustr.gov/countries-regions/africa/east-africa/rwanda>>.

"Rwanda Seasons & Climate." *Details*. N.p., n.d. Web. 27 Feb. 2014. <<http://www.wildland.com/destinations/africa/rwanda/seasonsclimate.aspx>>.

Seeger, Anthony "Traditional Music in Community Life: Aspects of Performance, Recordings, and Preservation | Cultural Survival." *Traditional Music in Community Life: Aspects of Performance, Recordings, and Preservation | Cultural Survival*. N.p., n.d. Web. 04 Apr. 2014. <<http://www.culturalsurvival.org/ourpublications/csq/article/traditional-music-community-life-aspects-performance-recordings-and-pres>>.

"Umuganda." *Umuganda*. N.p., n.d. Web. 23 Mar. 2014. <<http://www.rgb.rw/main-menu/innovation/umuganda.html>>.

Used Clothing. N.p., n.d. Web. 21 Mar. 2014. <<http://web.ita.doc.gov/tacgi/overseasnew.nsf/aa4fdbf8d8cad0038525729800529737/945dade1c99c9afb8525789d0049e595>>.

Uwanyuze Sharon, Rutsimba Emmanuel. Personal Interview. 17 Jan. 2014

## **Pictures**

Kigali city tower

<http://mw2.google.com/mw-panoramio/photos/medium/65396715.jpg>

Grass thatched houses/*Nyakatsi*

<http://gakondo.com/files/uploads/2013/10/Barasaba-ko-umusozi-wa-Makwaza-washyirwa-muhantu-ndangamateka.jpg>

<http://gakondo.com/files/uploads/2011/12/Uko-amata-n%E2%80%99inzoga-1.png>

<http://www.newtimes.co.rw/news/files/photos/14243-Grass-thatched-houses-in-Rwanda-will-be-replaced-permanent-houses,-with-iron-sheet-roofing.jpg>

Iron roofed house

<http://monpalais.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/Rwanda-House-under-construction-to-replace-Nyakatsi.png>

Dancers in *Umushanana*

<http://1.bp.blogspot.com/-bJ52HIGIWt4/UT-jltS3xAI/AAAAAAAAAEg/BycA60q5PJ4/s1600/dance.jpg>

Traditional containers

<http://www.orinfor.gov.rw/images/news/igisabo2681.jpg>

<http://static.panoramio.com/photos/large/6009273.jpg>

<http://www.rosinedeco.be/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/6Inkoko.jpg>