

**Maniragaba Balibutsa, *Une archéologie de la violence en Afrique des grands lacs* (Libreville: CICIBA, 2000), extract translated by Jean-Paul Martinon.**

*[In this book, Maniragaba Balibutsa explores the origins of violence in Rwanda and Burundi. For him, the origins of violence are directly related to the process of colonization and to the imported European myth of a superior race. In this way, while there is a connection between Nazism and an Aryan myth in Europe, there is a connection between the politics of Hutu power and the Hamite myth imported during the colonial period. Balibutsa explores this at several levels: cultural, ethical, societal, historical, etc. The following extracts are a draft translation of Balibutsa's arguments on the finality of human destiny and morality in Rwanda.]*

According to Alexis Kagame, the most important thing for a human being is to perpetuate their existence and in doing so to continue enjoying the fruits that come from it. Aware of having to die one day, Rwandans have adapted this desire to live forever by emphasizing the role of (having) children. Amongst his many citations, Kagame gives the following Rwandan saying: *Indishyi y'urupfu ni ukubyara*: the counterweight to death is procreation. This proverb is based on a simple concrete observation: man and woman were created so as to perpetuate themselves through procreation. Taking this as his lead, Kagame then concludes that the aim of humanity is the realization of the "ultimate end" of life on earth: procreation. "Our primo-genitors thus decided that everything has been created for mankind, whereas mankind was placed there in order to perpetuate itself." Making reference to

"the cultural formulation of man's ultimate end," Kagame quotes many Rwandan sayings that express either good wish or ill intentions and that focus on either problems of child bearing, sterility, or the privation of future generations. To sum up, Kagame asserts that for Bantu-Rwandan philosophy a) human beings have humankind as an end (amongst others), b) amongst all these ends, the ultimate end is the perpetuation of humanity's existence through procreation; which means that procreation is mankind's "ultimate end;" c) the worst that could therefore happen to someone is to miss this ultimate end, that is, to be unable to survive past their own death. But how is one to understand this passing away that "survives"?

In the second chapter of Dominique Nothomb's book, *Un Humanisme africain: Valeurs et pierres d'attente*, death in Rwanda appears to stand for what thwarts the meaning of life by suppressing it. However, the belief that the *umuzimu* (the spirit) carries on living after death re-establishes the continuity between the living and the dead. Death is not liberation or passage, but a metamorphosis. "Death is not the attainment of a richer or meaningful life; it is always conceived as a withering away, an ill, slow and progressive extinction." This interpretation goes in the same direction as the word *umuzimu*. If one accepts the fact that the verb itself means: "to pass away," then *umuzimu* can be understood as "the one who passed away" or "the one who is destined to pass away," or "the one who is threatened by extinction," or "the one who is destined to extinction." The issue here is that although the expression *umuzimu* expresses the opposite of *umuzima* (the living, the one who possesses *umuzima*,

i.e. life), the etymological relation between the two is essentially blurred. The same thing happens with the word *ikuzimu* (the world down below where the *bazima*—the dead—live) and *ibuzima* (the world down here where the living are)... In this way, the meaning of life is not elsewhere, but here in *this* world (*ibuzima*) where both the living and the dead cohabit, because, however little is left, the life of the *bazimu* (the spirit of the dead) still remains in the hands and spirits of the living, the *bazima*...

However, Rwandan tradition hasn't really addressed the question of the possibility or impossibility of immortality: does the *umuzimu* (the spirit) continue to exist forever or does "it" vanish once there are no more descendents? It is difficult to give an apodictic answer to this question. It would have bothered Dominique Nothomb and all those theologians who would have preferred that Rwandans decide on a specific theory for the *umuzimu* and their immortality, and on a theory of redemption and justice in the afterlife. ... Nothomb, and others like him, would also have preferred if God (*Imana*) were a kind of executioner who would be able to police the world. But for Rwandans, the implementation of a social justice only concerns human beings and nothing else. Further down Nothomb returns to this question. He notices, once more that, a "true moral conduct, a conduct that would be equal to that of the saint seeking eternal afterlife does not exist in Rwanda. And although notions such as "good" and "evil," "allowed," "forbidden" do exist amongst Rwandan people, God never intervenes, except to approve the punishments inflicted for having transgressed consciously or not prohibitions [*Dieu n'est présent que pour sanctionner l'automatisme des punitions déclenchées par la*

*transgression, même inconsciente des interdits*]. God has no other role." But what consequences, and specifically, what moral consequence can one draw from this lack of afterlife?

Chapter Seven of Nothomb's book returns to the fundamental principles of traditional Rwandan ethics, which can be summed up in the following way:

- a) The morality of actions is measured following a criteria of utility (*akamoro*) which in Rwanda requires the maintenance of the family (through procreation) and communitarian harmony, prosperity, strength and cohesion.
- b) What is immoral is therefore what prevents this communitarian harmony and the birth of new members... in other words, all that which weakens, divides, humiliates, and renders poor the social group...
- c) And finally, what is morally good, dignified, and praiseworthy consists in everything that protects, guarantees, strengthens, and restores the good of the social group through its perpetuation and its social wellbeing. This last point therefore targets all those who do not contravene with all of the above and therefore weaken their own social or familial group's interests.

Considering this, Nothomb then draws a couple of harsh conclusions that are reminiscent of the purest sophistic philosophy when it comes to the relativism of truth:

a) "It is legitimate to say 'yes' to the other, if *in each case*, one truly work towards the well-being of the social group one belong to; if in each case one believes it will or might strengthen a beneficial friendship. The important thing is not to get caught contradicting oneself, to be found in a conflict of interest, or to create damaging consequences. The other important thing is that my conscience remains in peace." ... In this way, the emphasis is not on the evilness created, but on the sorrow brought upon one's family, its cohesion, prosperity and fecundity.

b) "It is legitimate to say 'yes' even if one has no relation with either objective reality." The important here again is to ensure profitable social relations, friendship, the success of my business, the overall interests of my social group. Can this be a lie? Yes, maybe, but in this case, it is legitimate. When a lie is a sign of intelligence and ability, then one could say it is a laudable gesture.

What is one then to make of this popularised idea that traditional Rwandan morality is formal, based on appearance, egocentric, mean, and finally cruel because it ignores remorse. Can one say that we are basically faced with a morality without moral conscience, without interiority? Is it a morality at all? Is it possible that Rwandans lived without any morals until the arrival of Christianity?

Most importantly in what concerns us here, how is one to reconcile

this lack with the famous Rwandan *upubfura* (noble heart) all focused on autonomous interiority, decency, and generosity; this *upubfura* who uses a whole range of words and deeds that make of him or her a personality that attracts sympathy, consideration, and trust from his own social group? If tradition itself asserts that *upubfura bubu mu nda* (nobility comes from inside), then how is one to assert that Rwandan morality is *not* a clever calculation of private or group interests? Although Dominique Nothomb himself clearly understood the central role of the *upubfura* in Rwandan society, he still ended up allying himself to Kagame's thesis. How did he manage to reconcile what he said about the *umutima* (the heart) and the *upubfura* with this idea of a formal and calculating morality? And what of Pierre Crépeau, does he also not see the contradiction of affirming on the one hand,

-that the *umutima* (heart, centre of affective and emotional life, conscience) is the only criteria of truth goodness, true friendship, true beauty and that it is there that a person finds their true grounding;

-that the noble Rwandan (the *upubfura*) is the one who commands respects and admiration because of their own demeanour, beauty, manners, and natural authority that radiates from their personality and moral virtues;

-that the *upubfura* is dignity, attentiveness, fidelity, politeness, grace, discretion, reserve, moderation, pliable and serene; and that true goodness is that of the heart, of acquired qualities;

-that the *upubfura* can be seen where there is generosity and magnanimity, and not shameless egoity, which is precisely the opposite of the *upubfura*.

And on the other, that Rwandan morality is based on appearances and is relative because it is exclusively based on a calculation of mean interests?

There is no doubt that the ethics of the *upubfura*—which is one of the most striking creations of our ancestors—is a morality of goodness, responsibility, dignity and respect towards oneself and the other. As such, it fits in with the country's self-determination, and with the now well-recognized autonomy of Rwandan ethics. How can it be that such morality coexist with a morality based on the minute calculation of private interests, on the constant evaluation of consequences and for whom truth would no longer be the encounter between spirit and reality, but would result from the omission of lies, and whereby the evilness of crimes would be based purely on the ability to evade being caught? What kind of people can survive with such a superficial and cynic morality? Is it true that this morality prevailed in Rwanda? Or would there be two moralities in Rwanda: the *upubfura's* and the other? But who would have practiced the former and who the latter? Which group would have acted on the basis of such depraved morality? Would it be the Royal Court alone, as Dominique Nothcomb suggests? The only coherent explanation is that this depraved morality based on minutiae calculation is one syndrome in the structural and personal violence that affected Rwandan society. But whatever its roots, Rwandan morality can only aspire to be that of the *upubfura* and it

can only do this if it sheds away this structural violence that mined it from within.