

# Social Media and Sounding Out in the Cryptopolitical Landscape of the Burundian Conflict

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After decades of an oppressive one-party system and more than a decade-long ethnic conflict, Burundi saw a veritable blossoming of free and vibrant media in the first decade of the twentieth century. Independent radio stations emerged, supported by international NGOs that—with the experiences of the wars in Yugoslavia and the genocide in Rwanda in the 1990s—saw information as central to conflict escalation and de-escalation. In other words, the international community supported independent media as an integrated part of the peacebuilding exercise (Frère 2009), and Burundi was in many respects a model of international peacebuilding (Street, Smith and Mollet 2007). However, in 2015 the country once again experienced widespread violence, a massive outflux of refugees, and the closure of independent radio stations. Most journalists as well as civil rights activists went underground or fled the country while others were attacked or arrested. Overnight, the critical, vibrant radio stations were silenced and instead Burundians inside and outside the country made use of Twitter, WhatsApp, and other digital platforms in order to understand what was going on in their country (Falisse and Nkengurutse 2019; Frère 2017). In this chapter, I explore the relationship between the renewed violence and the media, and I do so by exploring the widespread idea that politics in Burundi always has a hidden agenda, an unseen truth beneath the surface—what we might call cryptopolitics. I argue that (social) media users simultaneously want to uncover cryptopolitics while also being constitutive of such speculative politics of secrecy and conspiracy. I further explore how cryptopolitics is affected by and plays into violent crises.

In my previous research on Burundi from the late 1990s and early 2000s, I found that ideas of secrecy and hiding true intentions have been prominent in Burundians' understanding of politics (Turner 2007b).

Through rumors and conspiracy theories, Burundians—from peasants to professors—tried to unveil the secret machinations of power and find the ulterior motives and grand schemes of politics; what Mbembé calls the underbelly of politics (Mbembé 2001) and what we in this volume term cryptopolitics.

How do Burundians deal with cryptopolitics and the art of revealing and concealing in a situation of crisis—and how do digital media play into this? While tweets, WhatsApp messages, and Facebook updates try to uncover and reveal the true workings of cryptopolitics—whether the secret violence committed by the state or rebel plots—they may also get caught up in a new set of deception politics. Furthermore, Burundian actors try to control and conceal their emotions while sounding out the emotions of others. Social media draw national cryptopolitics into the intimate and affective spheres of family, kin and neighbors, interpellating them and making them relate to these emotionally challenging issues, forcing them to play along with the game of veiling and unveiling.

In the following, I try to unpack the notions of secrets and lies that are so pervasive in Burundian society and relate this to issues of trust and mistrust, arguing that sociality may also be constituted through mistrust. I then explore the history of cryptopolitics in Burundi based on my own ethnographic engagement with the country for more than two decades. I explore how the media landscape has changed in this time period and how this has affected the shape and position of cryptopolitics in Burundi and its diaspora.

## Cryptopolitics and the Power of Concealment in Burundi

While I previously have perceived of cryptopolitics as a product of conspiracy theories that are ultimately about making sense of a chaotic world (Feldman 1995; Turner 2007a), I shift focus here to understanding cryptopolitics as a means of conducting politics itself. In other words, those in power also rely on cryptopolitics: on secret plans, hidden scripts, and ulterior motives. Following historian Aidan Russell (2019a, 2019b) and anthropologist Ethel Albert (1964), I argue that, in Burundi, politics is always seen to be a game of manipulating the truth and to rule is to have control over the word. Similarly, it is seen as extremely unwise to simply reveal your intentions as that would leave you open to attacks by your enemy. Not telling everything is not simply a cynical game of sovereignty, however. It can also be a means to help neighbors get along despite great antagonisms and memories of violence—as has been shown in for instance Bert Ingelaere's work on post-genocide Rwanda (2009b).

As mentioned in the introduction to this book, duplicity is not always linked to manipulation but can also be a sign of discretion. I found this in neighboring Rwanda in 2011, where I noticed that nobody used the word “genocide” (*yenoside* in Kinyarwanda) but simply talked about “the troubles” or perhaps “the war.” When I inquired about this, I was told that it was out of courtesy to the other people present, as one never knew which side they had been on during the genocide nor how they perceived the events.

Andrea Grant (2015) found that the insecurity of the state seeped like metastases into the everyday lives of Rwandans in what she called “quiet insecurity” where everyone was on guard in subtle manners. The political and the private are in other words entangled, forcing ordinary citizens to be attentive to cryptopolitics in all aspects of life. Although there are clear differences in the ways that the Rwandan and the Burundian states have dealt with conflict, genocide, and ethnicity, I would argue that the cryptopolitics of national politics also “metastases” into the everyday lives of Burundians. In my recent fieldwork in Kigali in 2016, I talked to a young Burundian woman (I call her Josephine), who had fled to neighboring Rwanda during the 2015 crisis. The following year she traveled clandestinely to Burundi to collect some documents and attend a family wedding. When she met a young man from her neighborhood and he asked where she lived and what she did for a living, she only told him part of the truth. Although she assumed that he is an informer, she could not know for sure, so she tried to avoid telling him the whole truth. However, she could not reject him either, because that would give away her suspicion about him being an informer and consequently reveal that she probably had not told him the whole truth. So, she ended up giving him her phone number with a polite smile, “but my heart was beating” she explained to me afterward. In other words, everyone acknowledges the art of deceit, and what is at play is to be able to hide “just enough” and reveal “just enough”—of both one’s own intentions and the intentions of the other. The art of deception requires skills and is emotionally demanding.

When talking to Burundians about politics, the question of secrets and lies always emerges (Turner 2005). Burundians from all walks of life would tell me that the problem with politicians is that they hide their true intentions and tell lies to the outside world in order to stay in power. I met Jean-Pierre (fictive name) at a café in Brussels in May 2005. He was very active in various newly established Tutsi groups online because he was afraid that the whole peace process was a hoax and kept repeating that he feared for the safety of the Tutsi. His greatest concern was not the Hutu now entering political positions but the previous Tutsi

president Buyoya who in Jean-Pierre's eyes had blood on his hands and who had cut a deal with the Hutu génocidaires to avoid persecution for his own war crimes (Turner 2007b). On the other side of the ethnic and political divide, I talked to Louis at a Burundian wedding in Copenhagen in 2006. He was a middle-aged Hutu who used to be an ambassador but at the time of our conversation was unemployed and lived in a housing estate outside Copenhagen, and he explained that he did not trust the transition either. The Hutu politicians in the transition government were simply lured in by the titles and the houses and per diems, he claimed. During my latest fieldwork among urban, middle-class Tutsi, exiled in Rwanda, their greatest concern was the ways in which the Burundian government pretended that everything was fine in the country while secretly abducting and killing people, leaving their bodies in communal graves.

## A Culture of Lies?

The concepts of secrecy and concealment go further than to politics, and Burundians often lament their own *culture du mensonge* (culture of lying) as something that permeates society in general. In fact, they would often warn me as a researcher that my results would be biased as nobody would tell me the truth. One Burundian, living in Belgium, told me that it is important in Burundian politics and society to not tell everything. You must keep some things *dans la poche* (in your pocket), he explained, or else it might be used against you. In other words, you put yourself in a weaker bargaining position if you lay all your cards on the table. "It is somehow related to witchcraft," he continued. The reference to witchcraft—he used the French term *sorcellerie*—was surprising to me, as Burundians rarely talk about witchcraft. But the comparison makes sense: your adversary needs something from you (hair, nails, blood, excrements, intimate possessions) in order to cast a spell on you or exploit you in other ways (White 2019).<sup>1</sup> Likewise, in politics, your adversary needs something from you in order to harm you. In the following I elaborate on this idea of needing to hide information—not in order to harm or deceive others but to protect oneself.

The concept of a culture of lies often has an ethnic/class twist to it, depending on with whom I was talking. The educated Hutu and Tutsi whom I met in the diaspora in Belgium and Denmark as well as the Tutsi in Rwanda and Burundi would not cast this in ethnic terms and instead claimed that it is a cultural trait of the Burundi as such. Meanwhile, the Hutu refugees in camps in Tanzania or living precariously on the

outskirts of Nairobi would talk openly about the differences between Hutu and Tutsi. Mostly, the Hutu refugees dismissed the “ethnic body maps” that were recounted to Liisa Malkki in Mishamo in the 1980s (Malkki 1995: 79–80) as a means to tell the difference between Hutu and Tutsi and explained instead that the differences lie in the behavior of the Tutsi. The Hutu get angry and then forget, they would explain, while the Tutsi can hide their feelings and do not forget. The Hutu are gullible while the Tutsi can carry a grudge and then hit back much later. This explained, to them, the reason why the Tutsi had been able to subjugate and dominate the Hutu when they arrived in the Great Lakes region centuries ago. It was their cunning deceit that allowed them to conquer the gullible Hutu (see also Malkki 1995: chapter 2; Turner 2010: chapter 7). The Tutsi minority, in these narratives, told by the Hutu refugees, used cryptopolitics to manipulate and rule the Hutu majority. Withholding truth and hiding emotions were central to their political power, according to the Hutu narratives. In other words, to wield this kind of power is to control emotions such as anger and fear and use them strategically instead. Feelings of anger, revenge, and rage are best kept hidden, they claim. I will explore the issue of controlling emotions in more detail later in the chapter.

When I asked about the conflict between Hutu and Tutsi, Hutu refugees would claim that they—as children and as Hutu—had been naïve and “blind” to the conflict, while the Tutsi children whom they had trusted as friends had known all the time. What exactly they had known remains unclear. It was only at critical events in history of widescale, open violence—like the selective genocide in 1972 and the ethnic violence in 1993—that the Tutsi would show their true intentions and the Hutu would “open their eyes” (Turner 2007a: 133). During my latest fieldwork among urban, middle-class Tutsi who had fled to the capital of neighboring Rwanda, I heard a slightly different version of this narrative about the gullible (Hutu) peasants. When asked whether they feared a genocide, they answered that the peasants had been easily manipulated by Hutu politicians in the past to believe that the Tutsi were their enemies. However, at present, the peasants in Burundi are too intelligent and can see through the politicians’ games. In other words, the ethnic and class stereotypes proscribe that Hutu/peasants<sup>2</sup> are gullible, easily manipulated, and hot-headed. However, these stereotypes are not set in stone and Burundians believe that history can teach them to behave differently. The Hutu are allegedly more “intelligent” now, with intelligence meaning the ability to “sound out” the ulterior motives of cynical politicians and navigate the cryptopolitical landscape of deceit and manipulation. The Hutu refugees in the camp similarly

believed that their position had changed with history. The violence of 1972 and 1993 “opened their eyes,” making them more “intelligent.” In their own words, intelligence is strongly connected to being able to see—see through the web of lies of the Tutsi and see their true intentions. And although intelligence and lack thereof are assumed to be linked to ethnicity and class, the poor Hutu peasants can also become “intelligent” once the Tutsi secrets have been revealed.

## The Aesthetics and Power of Speech

Based on fieldwork in the 1950s, Ethel M. Albert explored the role of speech and how it “is explicitly recognized as an important instrument of social life” (Albert 1964: 35). While the article certainly reflects the time it was written in, with its understanding of “cultures” as units, her findings might help us understand the relationship between concealment and power in Burundi. She shows how rhetoric, eloquence, and aesthetics are central to the command of speech and explains how this is linked to a very elaborate social hierarchy based on gender, age, ethnicity, and class. Highborn boys are trained, she argues, from the age of ten in the art of speech.<sup>3</sup> “Training includes mastery of a suitable, elegant vocabulary, of tone of voice and its modulation, of graceful gestures with hand and spear, of general posture and appropriate bodily displacements” (Albert 1964: 37). It is important not to get agitated, raise your voice, or display emotions. Women are trained to be quiet and timid. Meanwhile, peasants may speak in clumsy sentences, their voices too loud, their gestures wild, and their emotions freely displayed (1964: 38). The similarities between her analysis and that of the Hutu refugees I met in the camp in Tanzania are striking. They also claimed that the Hutu are loud and carry their emotions on the outside while the Tutsi know how to hide their emotions and intentions. We see here, how cryptopolitics—the art of concealing and revealing—is not simply about concealing and revealing information but also emotions. It is important to hide fear and anger if one is to be in control.

Albert links these conceptualizations of speech to local “cultural conceptions of truth, falsehood, and fiction” (1964: 44). What is important for the Burundians, she argues, is not whether a statement is objectively true or false but whether the argument is beautiful and whether it therefore is able to bring something good to its designers. “The key concept for appreciating the norms and values associated the uses of language is *ubgenge*,<sup>4</sup> ‘successful cleverness.’ *Ubgenge* chiefly applies to intellectual-verbal management of significant life situations” (1964: 44).

It is cleverness that uses emotions and beautiful rhetoric to achieve its goals. Political skills are therefore about being able to manipulate convincingly and elegantly. The art of political language is meant to speak to emotions and aesthetics through controlling and hiding emotions and manipulating facts.

Taking his cues from Ethel Albert and from the Burundian Catholic priest and philosopher André Makarazi, Aidan Russell (2019b) distinguishes between understanding the truth in Burundi at three levels. First, in philosophical terms, the distinction between truth and falsehood is similar to what we know from Western Enlightenment; there is an absolute truth. Second, in social terms, the truth can be powerful and potentially dangerous. It is therefore unwise to always tell the truth, as it can hurt you and others. Third, in political terms, “the words of an authority defined what functioned as true in public” (Russell 2019b: 22). For our purposes, we are concerned with the social and political aspects, and I will argue that the neat distinction between them makes little sense in practice.

Russell has warned against the myth of the *culture du mensonge* (2019b: 33). It is a culturally essentialist way of characterizing a whole people, and it reinforces racist stereotypes about the deceitful native.<sup>5</sup> However, the myth still exists among many Burundians as a kind of auto-ethnography and local theory, helping them make sense of politics, power, and social hierarchy in the Great Lakes region. Furthermore, a consciousness of how to reveal certain truths and hide others is still prevalent in the region today (Ingelaere 2009a; Nee and Uvin 2010; Russell 2019a). In their study of the (lack of a) truth and reconciliation process in Burundi, Ann Nee and Peter Uvin found that the vast majority of Burundians prefer to leave the past in silence. They argue that this approach to the past can be related to a general lack of trust in society, due perhaps to decades of violence and their “profound vulnerability” (2010: 173). This vulnerability means that it is important to maintain relations with people whom you do not trust. “Burundians protect themselves by nurturing relations, by compromising, by maintaining a poker face of acceptance under all conditions” (Nee and Uvin 2010: 173). Important here is not only to hide information but also emotions. A truth and reconciliation commission might bring truths to the fore that can jeopardize the volatile social relations between people.

Nee and Uvin further observe that Burundians themselves attribute this lack of trust to culture, describing themselves as masters of dissimulation and refer to proverbs such as “[t]he one who doesn’t lie has no food for his children” (2010: 174). Local intellectuals in Burundi—and in particular in Rwanda where similar debates take place but in a

different manner due to the political situation of the country—would tell me that there is no such tradition of concealing the truth; the mistrust is due to the genocidal violence. Their analysis is similar to that of Nee and Uvin. In everyday conversations, however, Burundians would constantly make references to the way they would never say things straightforwardly. Like when I was commended for my way of posing questions during interviews because they were not blunt like other Europeans—sometimes making my interlocutors laugh, smack their tongues, and snap their fingers if I posed a “trick question” about a sensitive issue: “you are like [a] Burundian!” While the Hutu would sometimes call this a Tutsi trait, both Hutu and Tutsi would claim that it was a Burundian—and Rwandan—trait.

### The Sociality of Mistrust

While secrecy, suspicion, and a culture of lies may seem to challenge and be at odds with sociality, several authors have shown how social relations can be maintained through suspicion and mistrust. In his study of how Burundians managed to co-habit after more than a decade of civil war, Peter Uvin (2009) found that Burundians had a deep-seated mistrust of one another. In a reversal of Putnamian ideas of social capital, he further suggests that this suspicion was the driver behind social relationships in Burundi, as it only makes sense to “keep your enemies close” so as to avoid betrayal. I saw these relationships all the time. My research assistant in Kigali in 2015 and 2016, a young Burundian woman who had fled to Rwanda in 2015, was telling me one day about some land that her family owned outside Bujumbura where they lived. She loved to visit the farm, she claimed, but she would only visit during the daytime because she feared that the neighbors and the farm laborers would kill her if she stayed the night. They were envious of her family’s wealth, she explained. Only her old grandmother stayed at the farm all the time. Her family did not confront the neighbors or go to the police. They would even have parties with the neighbors and laborers whom they assumed wanted them dead. In his thought-provoking work on mistrust in the Atlas Mountains, Matthew Carey warns us not to see mistrust as simply lack of trust and therefore infer that societies with low levels of trust are some kind of a “chaotic Hobbesian world of solitude, anomie, and pitiless mutual predation” (Carey 2017: 12). The proximity or familiarity of neighbors does not guarantee knowability or certainty, he argues. “(O)ther people are, in some sense, unknowable per se . . . their personality cannot be identified or used as a basis for prediction” (Carey



2017: 16). And yet, they manage to create sociality, he argues. We might say that neighbors are constantly sounding each other out, trying to know the unknowable. In my earlier work, I have similarly argued that the mutual suspicion and the perception that everyone is hiding their true intentions create a kind of tense sociality where everyone is playing hide and seek—with the added complication that everyone is hiding and seeking at the same time. Elegant rhetoric and the use of silences and euphemisms are central in this sociality, where truths are kept hidden “in the pocket”; whether they be about facts, about intentions, or about emotions. In the case of my research assistant, the fact was her family’s wealth, the intentions were—perhaps—to kill her family, and the emotions were her fear. All of these were hidden away in order to continue an edgy, nervous co-habitation.<sup>6</sup>

These constant attempts to conceal one’s true emotions and true intentions while also sounding out the intentions of others, create a world where nothing is what it seems and below the surface that can be seen and heard is another world that controls our world. In his study on marginalized urban poor in Guinea Bissau and among Bissauan migrants in Portugal, Henrik Vigh argues that a “nervous sociality” is created while they are constantly probing and scanning social life, looking for hidden intentions and negative potentials (Vigh 2018). Achille Mbembé invokes the idea of every “thing” having a “double” (Mbembé 2001) and argues that in Africa “everything almost always conceals something else” (2001: 148) and this something else—the invisible that lies within the visible—is just as important in determining the fate of things. In other words, in this “African” cosmology that he proposes, it is just as important to understand the invisible underbelly of things as to understand their visible surface. Mariane Ferme (2001) elaborates on the importance “the underneath of things” and the role of secrecy during and after violent conflict. She claims that the violence has created a “hermeneutic of suspicion” (Ferme 2001: 7) where people never trust the surface value of things and instead dig for deeper meanings “underneath.” She calls this “deep knowledge” of past violence, often lodged in mundane material objects and places. While there is a danger in her interpretation to render this knowledge more true or authentic than other knowledge, I find her idea that violence creates this “hermeneutics of suspicion” very helpful in understanding the widespread suspicion and secrecy in Burundi. Harry West and Todd Sanders (2003) argue that conspiracy theories are the product of modern enlightenment ideals about politics, truth, and transparency. The idea that a transparent “surface” permits us to look inside to the more “real” workings of power, strengthens the suspicion that power operates behind a “facade” (West and Sanders 2003: 16).

Conspiracy theories seek to shed light in dark spaces, but they are also content with opaqueness leaving some aspects undecided (West and Sanders 2003). Taking this argument further, Kathleen Stewart (2017) argues that conspiracy theories are mimetic of the internet. “The Internet was made for conspiracy theory; it *is* a conspiracy: one thing leads to another, always another link leading you deeper into no thing and no place, floating through the self-dividing and transmogrifying sites” (in Vine and Carey 2017: 56).

In sum, the profound sense of mistrust creates a sense that nothing and nobody is fully knowable. This leads to a constant search for underlying truths—often in the shape of rumors and conspiracy theories (Turner 2007a)—and the internet and social media seem the perfect place for these. In everyday interactions, Burundians find a means of sociality where everyone is “on their toes” concealing and revealing just enough to get along. In the realm of politics, power of the word is crucial, and the word of the ruler is the truth, Russell (2019b: 22) argues. However, Burundians operate with layers of truth, allowing them to act as if the word of the ruler were the only truth while simultaneously sounding out<sup>7</sup> their adversaries in order to ascertain their hidden intentions and be prepared for alternative actions.

## Conflict and Conspiracy in Burundi

Burundi gained independence from Belgium in 1962 and has since experienced ethnic violence, authoritarian rule, and civil war. From shortly after independence from Belgium until 1993 the country had been ruled by army officers in charge of a one-party authoritarian state (Chrétien 2003; Lemarchand 1996). They kept power tightly in the hands of Tutsi from the Bururi region in the south of the country while banning mention of ethnicity, because it was allegedly a false identity introduced by the colonialists to divide and rule the country. Under pressure from the international community, then President Pierre Buyoya introduced reforms in the early 1990s leading to the election of the country’s first democratically elected president—a moderate Hutu from the opposition. He was, however, killed by Tutsi officers, triggering widespread ethnic violence and a civil war that lasted almost ten years, costing an estimated 300,000 lives. The Arusha Peace Accords—signed in the year 2000 and leveraged through by Nelson Mandela—provided a road map for a sophisticated power sharing deal that sought to serve the needs of all groups (Lemarchand 2007). It was not until 2003, however, that the largest rebel group, CNDD-FDD (Conseil National Pour la

Défense de la Démocratie—Forces pour la Défense de la Démocratie), signed a peace agreement and put down arms. In 2005, elections were held, bringing CNDD-FDD to power and their leader Pierre Nkurunziza to the presidency.

When I did fieldwork for over a year in a refugee camp for Burundian Hutu refugees in Tanzania in the late 1990s, they were deeply concerned with—and engaged in—the war in their home country. Central to their concerns was what they perceived to be the manipulation of “the truth” by “the Tutsi,” and they were adamant that the truth about the oppression of the Hutu come out to the outside world (Turner 2002, 2005). They would often ask me to tell their story to “the big nations” because they were convinced that the Tutsi regime in Burundi was feeding the “big nations” with lies. Once the outside world knew the truth, they would help the Hutu, according to the refugees in the camp (Turner 2004). The struggle, as they perceived it, was not just to be carried out with guns in the forests of northern Burundi but was equally a battle of words—lies and secrets. And the audience was Burundians and the international community.

In 2003–6, I did fieldwork among the Burundian diaspora in Denmark and Belgium. This was during the period of transition when the peace process was still fragile, and while some Burundians in Denmark and Belgium chose to return to Burundi to get their share in the peace deal, others remained skeptical of the process, claiming that it was all a trick by the Tutsi to co-opt the naïve Hutu. The diaspora had always seen it as its prime goal and *raison d'être* to combat what they saw as the misinformation that the state propaganda machine was churning out to the Burundian public and to the international community. Burundian Hutu in exile in Belgium, France, Germany, and Denmark were eagerly gathering information about the wrongdoings of the government and publishing it online on websites like ARIB<sup>8</sup> and AG News (Africa Generation News).<sup>9</sup> Central to their strategy was an understanding that the Burundian government was deeply engaged in cryptopolitics and one should never take the statements of the Burundian government at face value. There were always hidden scripts and conspiracies to be unearthed and uncovered, they claimed. They claimed that they had better access to the truth outside the country than those living inside Burundi (Turner 2006). With the peace process and the transition to democratic rule including the development of vibrant media in the early 2000s, the diaspora gradually lost its *raison d'être* as political watchdogs. However, many Burundians in the diaspora claimed that the peacebuilding process and transition to democracy with its complicated system of ethnic quotas in the political system, the judiciary, and the

army were simply a veneer to cover up the real power of the Tutsi. This was, in other words, a much more dangerous kind of cryptopolitics than the more brutish oppression of the old regime (Turner 2007a, 2008a, 2008b, 2009). They were warning against taking the peace process at face value and sounding out negative potentialities (Vigh 2018).

The peace lasted, and the media became famous in the region with dedicated journalists contributing to a lively debate (Frère 2009). By 2005, “the Burundian media sector had become a model of pluralism and journalistic professionalism” (Frère 2017: 4). However, the new regime, headed by the popular ex-rebel leader and born-again Christian, Pierre Nkurunziza, turned increasingly autocratic, limiting the freedom of expression in several ways—most notably with the media law in 2013 (Frère 2016). The state crackdown on journalists was met by vocal protests from local independent media and civil society organizations. The case of the imprisoned Bob Rugurika became iconic for this struggle.<sup>10</sup> He was arrested in January 2015 after his radio station (RPA, Radio Publique Africaine) broadcast a confession implying government involvement in the murder of three Italian nuns in 2014. After massive popular protests and pressure from independent media, he was released a month later.

In early 2015, tensions ran high, as speculations circulated that the sitting president would decide to run for a third term in the presidential elections later that year—despite the move being considered unconstitutional. In April, President Nkurunziza announced his decision to run for the presidential elections and people took to the streets in Bujumbura and other cities to demonstrate against a decision that they considered unconstitutional and against the spirit of the Arusha Peace Accords. The crisis escalated from day one, as the police clashed violently with protesters—and with excessive force (see Van Acker 2015). The youth wing of the ruling party, the Imbonerakure, in collaboration with the secret service threatened, beat, and abducted individuals from the so-called *quartiers contestataires* (the parts of Bujumbura where the protests took place). The local radio stations played a central role in the period leading up to the demonstrations, as did the idea of cryptopolitics. In the words of Antoine,<sup>11</sup> a middle-aged, man who had held a high position in an international organization in Burundi and who I met in Kigali in 2015 and in 2016, whereto he had fled in 2015: “Before the president announced his intention to run for the presidential elections, everyone was asking themselves what would happen. The media and civil society were posing the question of whether or not he would run for a third term” (my translation). Rumors began circulating, and people began discussing whether this was actually in contradiction with

the Arusha Accords. “With the discussions about the Arusha Accords and the constitution and the radio and TV programs, we realized that this would not be easy.” In other words, the radio and TV stations were seen as crucial for uncovering the true, malign intentions of the president. Even before he officially announced his intention to run for a third term, journalists, activists, and other public figures were trying to predict whether he might have such intentions on radio. They were sounding out the president’s intentions, even before he had made any announcement, and were speculating about the possible outcomes and consequences. Sounding out can be future-oriented and anticipatory.<sup>12</sup> While there was much anxiety, according to Antoine, about the possible unconstitutional move by the president, it was also a time of great engagement by civil society and the media, debating the constitution and criticizing the potential decision of the president. There was, on the one hand, the fear of cryptopolitics, while on the other hand, there was hope that the present “openness” in the public sphere could reveal these hidden agendas and hence diffuse them. The mere fact that they were debating these issues in the media and that various actors, from the Catholic Church to human rights organizations, were criticizing such a decision was a sign in Antoine’s mind that common people could influence the outcome of politics.

When the president finally announced his decision to run for a third term and people took to the streets, the demonstrations were intensely covered by the local media and spread on social media as well. Pictures of colorful crowds of urban youth, chanting on the streets of Bujumbura also quickly made their way to international media (mostly in the Francophone world, as usual).<sup>13</sup>

The months up to the president’s announcement had been marked by speculation. Speculation can be seen as a means to explore possible futures and theorize about motives, hidden agendas, and possible causalities behind events. The speculations in Burundi in early 2015 brought the assumed hidden aspects of cryptopolitics into the daylight of public debate. But the debate was still uncertain and speculative, as the president might or might not decide to run for a third term. The speculations carried with them both anxiety and hope, and cryptopolitics remained cryptic. Once the president actually made his announcement to run for a third term, the speculations ceased to be speculations, as Nkurunziza revealed his intentions. The result was that many Burundians saw no choice but to go to the streets and openly air their anger and frustration. It was a moment where the hidden side of cryptopolitics was revealed on both sides. My interlocutors like to talk about the conflict always being there, but sometimes it is closed and

other times it is open. Now it was open. And yet the struggle to define the truth and unveil the other's deceptions continued.

My latest fieldwork in 2015 and 2016 has been in the capital of neighboring Rwanda, the destination of twenty thousand fleeing Burundian refugees in 2015. These were mostly middle-class, urban Tutsi who had felt targeted by the regime in the wake of the 2015 violence, either because they lived in the areas of the capital city, Bujumbura, where the anti-third term demonstrations had taken place or because they were journalists, human rights activists, or members of opposition parties. They were experiencing a very different media landscape than the refugees I had met more than a decade earlier. Rather than a small group of political entrepreneurs controlling the information from exile, information was moving much faster in all directions via social media on mobile phones inside the country and abroad (Turner and Berckmoes 2020).

## Unearthing the Secrets of Power

Meanwhile, the government seemed unprepared for the media war. In May 2015, the police looted and burned the premises of several independent radio stations, and most journalists went into hiding or fled abroad. By July 2015 more than eighty Burundian journalists had left the country, most of them settling in Rwanda (Frère 2017).

With the destruction of the independent broadcasting sector in Burundi (Frère 2016), Burundians inside the country and abroad turned to social media for communication on the crisis. The government attempted clumsily to block the use of Twitter and WhatsApp but people simply dodged the system with other VPNs (Vircoulon 2016). Social media were used to maintain contact with people in other locations, to share information about dangers in particular areas, as well as to speculate about developments in the political domain (Vircoulon 2016).

Burundians have experienced a large growth in use of and access to social media. In 2000, 0.1 percent of the population were internet users. This figure rose to 1.1 percent in 2011 and 5.5 percent in 2017.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, the number of mobile phone subscriptions rose from 64,000 in Burundi in 2003 to 5.92 million in 2017.<sup>15</sup> In December 2017, there were 450,000 registered Facebook subscribers in Burundi.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, news that is received via social media may be shared with many more people (Paviotti 2019: 353). For Burundians in the diaspora, this rise in the use of mobile phones and internet users inside the country meant that connections with family and friends could be re-established and

intensified, as Facebook, WhatsApp, and Viber, among others, enabled cheap, direct communication.<sup>17</sup> I have been fortunate to have followed the use of online platforms among Burundians in exile from the beginning of the twenty-first century and hence see the changes.<sup>18</sup> It can be argued that the increased reliance on social media marked the beginning of a new era where information was no longer in the hands of an elite, as it was at the beginning of the twenty-first century, because most Burundians inside and outside Burundi had access to the internet and a phone with a camera (Frère 2016). However, as Jean-Benoît Falisse and Hugues Nkengurutse (2019) argue, despite the supposed flattening and two-way nature of the social media, they remain dominated by a small group of “influencers.” This is especially the case for Twitter accounts where most tweets are in English or French rather than Kirundi or Swahili (2019: 182), indicating that the intended audience is international (Dimitrakopoulou and Boukala 2018: 132). Furthermore, there are profiles on Twitter that have tens of thousands of followers making them more of a one-way media than a platform of equal exchange as we see with WhatsApp and Facebook.

It is important to keep in mind that only few Burundians use Twitter and that much of the social media sharing happens on an everyday basis when friends and families share news and views. This news can be personal, like when your sister sends you a WhatsApp message that her son is in prison and can you please help by sending money for a bribe or by calling your childhood friend who is now the local head of police. It can also be news that is shared like gossip.

Politicians, journalists, and other professionals still play a role, yet they have to play it differently. For instance, some journalists in exile in Rwanda were able to create alternative media outlets with radio programs such as *Inzamba* and *Humura Burundi*, which are disseminated through social media networks and supported by European donors. Other journalists became activists who started to share their views on blogs, following different professional rules than they would have as journalists. Similarly, journalists in Burundi are struggling to carry out their profession in the radio and newspaper outlets that remain or have been newly established (Frère 2017).

SOS Médias Burundi is an example of this. In the “about” section of its Facebook page, SOS Médias Burundi writes (in French):

On 13 and 14 May 2015, during a failed coup, radio studios were attacked, looted, and burned down. Journalists and facilitators were chased away from their workplaces. Threatened, some chose to flee the country whereas others hid to escape violence. A few [journalists] continued

to work by offering coverage of the events on Facebook, Twitter, and Soundcloud. This social network is called “SOS Médias Burundi” (SOS MBDI). This initiative is the work of journalists, civil society actors in Bujumbura and the diaspora and friends of Burundi.<sup>19</sup>

With 57,000 Facebook followers and 54,300 Twitter followers as of December 2020, SOS Médias Burundi has worked to provide an alternative news source for Burundians. From July 2016 to August 2017, SOS Médias Burundi’s Twitter @SOSMediasBDI had been mentioned 33,580 times, reaching over 6.1 million accounts.

In the years after the 2015 crisis, SOS Médias Burundi posted frequently, often several times a day. Some posts contain graphic content, with Burundians covered in blood and bruises. They also post links to lengthier articles as well as short announcements with only the details of what happened and to whom. Their Facebook page is filled with arrest announcements, often concluding with “no excuse for the arrest was given.”

According to the founder of SOS Médias Burundi, it is paramount that they verify their news with old-school news principles. “What you’ll get at SOS: no propaganda, no rumors, no support of opposition or government. We do our job.”<sup>20</sup> This is reflected in the very factual posts where there are no long speculations or analyses; simply photos, names, and dates. Their aim is to bear witness to the activities that the regime tries to hide.

Meanwhile, individual activists are also very active online and attract massive numbers of followers. Teddy Mazina is an example. He started as a photographer and later became an activist, documenting what he saw in Burundi. This forced him to flee to Europe when the threats from the regime became too intense. He decided to set up a Twitter headquarters in a one-bedroom flat in an occupied building where he and a friend have twelve-hour shifts—but they both use his name in the tweets.<sup>21</sup> As of December 2020, he has more than 14,000 followers on Facebook and 54,000 on Twitter.

Every time he learns of an arrest or a disappearance from his network of informants in Burundi, he posts names, dates, places and preferably photos—tagging various international presidents and UN officials. He is in effect acting as a witness, giving testimony and making sure that those who have the power to act, “see” what is going on. By tagging important international actors, he is forcing them to “see” and to witness the injustices that he unveils. Teddy Mazina and SOS Médias Burundi claim that the Burundian government is breaching basic human rights and committing injustices against the Burundian population, and that



the authorities are doing their best to cover their tracks. The primary task for these journalist/activists is therefore to document these crimes and bring them to light. By doing so, they claim that they can combat the cryptopolitics of the regime. For this to work, however, they also need an audience: hence the tagging of important “others.” The journalists in exile and others sharing information on social media are trying to unearth and uncover the secret, hidden, dark sides of the regime—the sides that the president and his advisors prefer not to be seen. The basic message is that you should not believe what President Pierre Nkurunziza and his advisor, Willy Nyamitwe, are saying because they are hiding their true misdeeds. Therefore, much of the information being shared on Twitter, WhatsApp, and other platforms is about documenting—bringing into the light—and revealing cryptopolitics. By revealing this to important international actors—hence the tagging of these—his intention is to unveil the deceit of the regime and hence delegitimize it.

Social media may also be used at a very different level for the same purpose. An example is Reverien whom I met in Kigali in 2016. His story is long and painful, and I am not doing it justice by shortening it here, but it illustrates how hiding and revealing were central to his strategy of survival when avoiding the secret service. At one point he was arrested by unknown men, beaten, given an injection that made him sleep, and taken to a dark house in the forests. When he woke up, he realized that he still had his phone on him and quickly sent messages to two contacts via WhatsApp, immediately deleting the messages again. His friend shared this information on Reverien’s Facebook profile and within hours the message had “become hot” as he expressed it. In the meantime, he was beaten, interrogated, and left in the dark room, and he could hear his abductors discuss his execution. Then he heard his abductors receiving phone calls and discussing heatedly what to do. Finally, they gave him another injection, and next thing he knows, he woke up on the side of the road in Bujumbura. His life was saved because he was able to witness the secret violence of the regime and tell the world about it via social media. If they had killed him, they would have proven him right in his accusations. Cryptopolitics plays two ways, however. On the one hand, the state is vulnerable to the kind of revelation that Reverien made possible with his WhatsApp message. On the other hand, its strength depends on people “knowing” that it is capable of committing such secret violence. The violence of the state—its cryptopolitics—must remain a “public secret” (Taussig 1999).

At the beginning of the first decade of the twenty-first century, the Burundian opposition—often in the diaspora—were also busy

unearthing the hidden truths of the regime. However, they did so through long-winding conspiratorial analyses of Burundi's history, unveiling diabolic conspiracies that involved the Vatican, France, Belgium, and regional leaders. In the words of Kathleen Stewart, quoted in the beginning of this chapter, "the internet was made for conspiracy theory . . . one thing leads to another" (Stewart in Vine and Carey 2017: 56). On these websites, links were made—both literally through the use of hyperlinks that took the reader deeper into myriad connections, often going in circles, and figuratively, as signs, words, phrases and actions were read as omens and inserted into speculations about large plans to exterminate the Hutu/Tutsi (Turner 2008a). I have also heard these conspiracy theories told by Burundian individuals in Tanzania, Kenya, Belgium, and Denmark. However, when transmitted orally they retain a sense of being ephemeral and temporary. The links that are made are tentative rather than absolute, allowing them to change. The websites of Burundi-sites.com and others made them somehow "stick" and become more real.

The strategy of Teddy Mazina and SOS Médias Burundi is very different. They also want to unearth the secret, hidden truths of the regime and subvert its narrative. But rather than analyze possible causes and speculate on connections, they simply bring facts to the table: photos of maimed bodies, names, documents, and dates. These appear as indisputable facts that cannot be denied or explained away. They demand a response from their viewers whether they are international human rights organizations, the African Union, or members of the Burundian government. Mazina makes this link even more clear by tagging the actors that in his mind should witness his posts.

In sum, I claim that the internet sites of the beginning of the twenty-first century were run by a handful of individuals, often based in Belgium, Denmark, or Switzerland, who interpreted events in Burundi and presented ideologically shaped narratives that were mostly consumed by those with the same understanding of the situation. By contrast, the recent events in Burundi are shared "undigested." Those who share them make a point out of not interpreting them and feeding them into a narrative but rather letting them "speak for themselves," only adding facts such as time, date, place, photographic evidence, and names, leaving it up to the viewer to make sense of them. My point is that they become "real" in the process and that they interpellate the viewer. They cannot be ignored and demand some kind of (re-)action.

While this is an efficient means of revealing cryptopolitics because it proves the flaws of the regime's narrative, it is also an emotionally challenging strategy for those who witness. I encountered several Burundians

in Kigali who had a hard time receiving pictures of maimed bodies because they felt that they should do something while they also felt that they were unable to make a difference. In some cases, they attempted to avoid the constant flow of information coming from Burundi in order to protect themselves. We have called them “reticent diasporas” (Turner and Berckmoes 2020), and they show why simply uncovering the truth is not always a desirable option. Living in and with cryptopolitics is a balancing act between veiling and unveiling. Just as deception can be both treacherous and cautious, unearthing deception can be both empowering and hurtful.

### *Ubgenge* and Social Media

With the new importance of social media, information has become instant, multidirectional, and a site for conflicting parties to clash and mobilize people for their cause. On the one hand, opposition groups, activists, and journalists—inside and, in particular, outside the country—are doing their best to discredit the regime by revealing all its clandestine deeds. On the other hand, the regime in place is striking back via the same media, trying to delegitimize the opposition. The president’s advisor, Willy Nyamitwe, has been actively defending the regime and undermining the opposition on Twitter. Nyamitwe has, as of 14 December 2020, over 113,400 followers and has tweeted 41,400 times. In the year from 8 May 2016 to 6 June 2017, @willynyamitwe was mentioned 141,400 times. He often enters online discussions and challenges his opponents on Twitter, and he openly threatens journalists, accusing them of being traitors who spread rumors about the president (Dimitrakopoulou and Boukala 2018: 140).

In November 2016, the International Federation of Human Rights (FIDH) launched a Twitter campaign with the hashtag #StopThisMovie. It linked to what resembled a trailer for a fictive movie called *Genocide in Burundi: The Only Movie You Don’t Want to See* with scenes of terrified children running along red earth paths accompanied by ominous music. Shortly afterward, Willy Nyamitwe launched a countercampaign, using the hashtag #ThisIsMyGenocide. Andrea Purdeková argues that such campaigns are about playing on anticipation and fear of an imminent danger of genocide, drawing on a register of memories from Rwanda and Burundi (2019). We may see this as an example of the ways both sides are accusing the other of concealing the truth. At a deeper level,

we see how they are able to draw on a number of anxieties about possible futures, based on memories of past violence.

Where SOS Médias Burundi and Teddy Mazina use social media to expose the hidden cryptopolitics of the regime by posting what appear to be irreducible truths—bodies, names, documents—#StopThisMovie uses a radically different strategy to warn against the hidden truths of the regime. It provides no details whatsoever and instead hints through its aesthetics at memories of previous mass violence, stoking anticipations of potentially catastrophic futures. As Purdeková notes, the movie clip “mirrors” the genocide in Rwanda in 1994, ignoring the fact that this took place in another country and in another political context. Through this mirroring, it also points toward possible future disasters, creating what Purdeková calls a sense of imminence. There is a sense that this is a country on the brink (Purdeková 2019). The hashtag #StopThisMovie works to mobilize emotions of fear and anxiety, linking them to memories of past violence. This is a very different strategy to the ones of SOS Médias Burundi and Teddy Mazina who stick to “facts.” It sounds out the hidden truths of the regime through emotions and memories, claiming that there are undercurrents that have links to the violence of 1993.

Nyamitwe’s response was to simply post small videoclips of people dancing, having fun on speedboats on the lake and other quotidian, happy forms of being together. Below these videoclips he added the hashtag #ThisIsMyGenocide, insinuating that the FIDH had no clue about the reality on the ground in Burundi. In general, the government response has been to portray Burundi as a country that is peaceful where life goes on as usual. Along with these posts are direct or indirect accusations that the idea of violence and crisis is made up by Europeans and by Burundians in the diaspora and has nothing to do with reality on the ground. It is worth noting that almost half of the accounts using the hashtag #StopThisMovie were based in France with less than 7 percent based in Burundi, while 67 percent of the users of #ThisIsMyGenocide were based in Burundi.

In sum, attempts to uncover the hidden “underneath” of the Burundian regime, and to reveal the truth about its intentions, have taken place on the internet for decades. However, it seems that there has been a shift away from elaborate conspiracy theories to a focus on unearthing and documenting the “brutal facts” of the regime, calling on the viewer to witness the hidden, violent side of the regime. When FIDH tried to make a more speculative account, appealing to fears and anticipation, it might have backfired, at least inside the country when the presidential spokesperson launched a counter campaign. This campaign was however, delegitimized by some of the important Twitter activists when they

once again linked it to concrete names and bodies, thereby trying to subvert the government claim that everything is business as usual.

## Trying to Remain Invisible to the Eye of the State

In situations of open violence, the underneath spills over into the visible world of words and actions. Violence is committed against bodies, which leaves marks and traces that cannot be denied. My interlocutors almost preferred these moments where “true intentions” saw the light of day over the long periods where conflict was hidden, and intentions were secret. This was the case of the selective genocide in 1972 and the ethnic violence in 1993. In the case of the 2015 crisis, violence also emerged but the regime still tried to hide it. I was told that the militia and the secret service would arrive in the *quartiers contestataires* at night in cars without numberplates and with no headlights. People were abducted and taken to secret facilities for torture and interrogation, their bodies dumped in communal graves or in ditches across the city.

Nobody knows who is in danger of being arrested, beaten or killed. But people are busy making theories about this. Basically, it is claimed that young people—in particular men but also women—are targeted, because they were most active in the demonstrations. People from the *quartiers contestataires* are also targeted, they claim. Finally, individuals who are journalists, human rights activists, or members of opposition parties are targeted. The Burundian refugees with whom I talked in Kigali had to navigate in relation to these assumed patterns of regime violence. This meant that they had to make themselves invisible or unrecognizable to the authorities and the militias as they navigated their way through and out of the city, playing a game of hide and seek in quite literal terms. Young people would not take the direct bus from Bujumbura to Kigali—a trip of roughly four hours—but take several buses, sometimes even via Congo, often taking days. Jean-Paul is a young man I met in Kigali in 2015. He had lived in Mutakure, which is one of the problematic parts of Bujumbura, and when he left on his own, he took a bus to Kivu in DRC (Democratic Republic of the Congo) and from there to Rwanda. As the bus was leaving Bujumbura, he was stopped at a roadblock and ordered to leave the bus because they could see in his papers that he was from Mutakure. Fortunately, other passengers intervened, and he was able to stay on board. One strategy to avoid being spotted was to get an ID from another part of the country. Another strategy was to get a passport, because it does not list one’s address. The problem with passports, they claim, is that you get a stamp

each time you cross the border. Reverien, whom we met earlier and who was abducted and almost killed, had previously had problems at roadblocks because he had many stamps in his passport and had to explain that this was due to his work at the airport. This was partly true, although he no longer worked at the airport and had fled to Kigali with his wife and children.

Not only identity papers but also bodies give away truths about individuals. Truths that they might prefer to hide from the regime. Because Mutakure and other *quartiers contestataires* are historically Tutsi neighborhoods, the police may suspect anyone who looks “Tutsi” of being from these areas and hence a rebel. And while many Tutsi and Hutu look alike, some individuals have classic Tutsi looks that can play against them in these tense situations of trying to hide from the authorities. The militia, manning the roadblocks use these visual signs—the ID card and phenotypes—in their attempts to sound out who is an enemy of the state and who can be allowed to pass.

Another way for the police to identify the true identity and intentions of those they suspect of being “rebels” is to control people’s mobile phones to see whether the owner follows known critical figures or organizations—such as Teddy Mazina and SOS Médias Burundi. As a counter strategy, people would erase their WhatsApp accounts and remove their contacts from their phones before traveling outside the capital. One Burundian man in Kigali told me that it was better to install fake WhatsApp and Twitter accounts where they follow uncontentious stories or pro-government personalities. This man displays great skills in the art of veiling and unveiling his intentions.

The skills of sounding out and the emotional management involved often took more subtle forms and could seep into relationships between neighbors as well. We saw this in the case of Josephine’s childhood friend and neighbor who asked her where she lived and how she made a living. And we saw it when my research assistant would visit her family farm but not stay the night.

In the game of cryptopolitics in the African Great Lakes, it is not just the state—or other political actors—trying to hide their true intentions and activists and ordinary citizens trying to uncover these intentions. The authorities are similarly trying to unveil the true identity of its citizens who are doing their best to hide their identities—or rather, they are trying to hide certain aspects and paint another picture of themselves. A picture that might not bring danger upon them.

## Conclusions

The ability to control and conceal information, intentions, and emotions gives access to political power, according to common understanding in Burundi. The result is that politics is never taken at face value and that whatever is stated always has an underneath. Therefore, politics in Burundi is about trying to second-guess what people “really mean” and what the ulterior motives are of this or that statement or action. I have used the concept “sounding out” to capture the subtle ways actors try to unveil the intentions of others without revealing their own intentions in the process.

Sounding out and the art of concealment are not just concerned with facts. They are equally about emotions. It is important to hide one’s emotions in order to achieve one’s goals. While this may put someone in a superior position, it may also be used by the dominated, as when Josephine hides her fear and repulsion and gives the young man, who has the power to put her in prison, her phone number. However, hiding the truth can also be a means to protect the emotions of both parties, as when family members do not tell their kin about the difficulties that they are in. Often people avoid talking about certain historical events if they do not know what side their interlocutors were on during a particular event. Finally, the game of cryptopolitics—of sounding out—can create emotional strain, leading some people to simply avoid the field altogether, like when they stop using WhatsApp and Twitter.

Against this hidden, secret violence, activists and journalists attempt to make the victims visible by bringing pictures of their maimed bodies, ID cards with names and photos and the date of their disappearance. All this is meant to bear witness to the violence of the regime and make visible its cryptopolitics—its hidden underneath.

When I explored how the conflict played out in cyberspace almost twenty years ago, the diasporas in Europe and North America—at first Hutu but increasingly also Tutsi—were busy on various websites fighting a war of words. They would create and reproduce grand conspiracies about Hima empires and Hutu genocidal ideologies, involving the Vatican, Belgium, France, and most regional leaders. They would bear witness to the various types of violence that the people of Burundi had experienced, and they would immerse these accounts into large schemes. While some of these sites still exist and continue to create grand conspiracy theories,<sup>22</sup> much of the activity on today’s social media is about documenting the violence with pictures and names. Perhaps it is the instantaneous and multidirectional character of social media that

promotes such fast, short updates. In terms of unearthing the “truth” about the power in place, it finds its legitimacy not in lengthy exposés of possible conspiratorial links but in the authenticity of bodies and names as facts that cannot be brushed away and denied. They demand answers of the onlooker, creating emotional strain at times. They do not go away and cannot be solved by excuses. In one sense they follow the art of cryptopolitics because they sound out the other while keeping their own intentions opaque. In other senses, they transgress the rules of cryptopolitics because they so bluntly state the facts.

Social media are a means to unveil the cryptopolitics of the regime. But they are also dangerous, because the regime may use these networks to unveil the unveiling. In the game of hide and seek that has always characterized politics in Burundi, digital media are a strong means to try to destabilize both the sovereign and the subject—revealing true identities that are best kept hidden. Therefore, both the sovereign and the subject are desperately trying to cover their tracks or even better to create new, fake identities.

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## Notes

1. A number of scholars argued in the late 1990s that such witchcraft rumors can be linked to neoliberal exploitation and what the Comaroffs call the “casino economy” in Africa (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999; Geschiere 1997; White 2000).
2. Hutu would most often use the ethnic terms while Tutsi would prefer to talk about peasants. Often “peasants” (or “poor people,” “uneducated people”) was used a euphemism for Hutu. This speaks to a large political tension that dates back to the time of independence at least. Very shortly and crudely put: On the one side, the Hutu used their ethnic identity to claim emancipation from centuries of feudal rule by the Tutsi. On the other side, the Tutsi argued that ethnicity was invented by the Belgians in order to divide and rule the country and claimed national unity to combat colonial rule.
3. Speech translates as *imvuga*, from the verb *kwvuga* (to speak, to discuss, and to claim). The art of speech, as we shall see below is often related to the term *ubgenge/ ubwenge*.
4. *Ubgenge* (sometimes written as *ubwenge*) is translated as wisdom, knowledge, sense, intelligence, and consciousness. The concept has been the subject of various scholarly and political debates. In his most recent book, Rene Lemarchand calls it “a sort of street-smart knack to tell lies and get away with it” (Lemarchand 2021: 129). Pierre Erny claims that *ubgenge* “désigne l’intelligence, la ruse, la débrouillardise, le fait d’être malin” (refers to intelligence, cunning, resourcefulness and being smart) (Erny 2003).



5. I might add that along with the colonial stereotype of the deceitful Tutsi native, there is a corresponding colonial stereotype, namely, the happy-go-lucky native. In this case it is the hard-working, honest but gullible Hutu.
6. There are many parallels to the world of witchcraft and witchcraft accusations, so nicely explored by Peter Geschiere among others. He shows how witchcraft emerges in the uncertainty of the most intimate relations. The fear of betrayal among kin is larger than any betrayal. While I rarely came across witchcraft in Burundi, the vulnerable sociality of mistrust and the risk of accusations are similar (Geschiere 1997).
7. To sound out: “to try to find out the opinions of someone by asking questions.” This very much explains what is going on. “Sound out.” *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*. Retrieved 14 January 2023 from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/sound%20out>.
8. ARIB. “Kaz-Bienvenue.” Retrieved 14 January 2023 from [www.arib.info](http://www.arib.info).
9. AG News (Africa Generation News). “Recent News.” Retrieved 14 January 2023 from [www.burundi-agnews.org](http://www.burundi-agnews.org). The site was created in 1994 and was formerly called [www.burundi-sites.com](http://www.burundi-sites.com).
10. BBC News. 2015. “Burundians Celebrate as Journalist Bob Rugurika Freed.” BBC News, 19 February. Retrieved 14 January 2023 from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-31535621>.
11. Not his real name.
12. For a discussion on anticipation and anxiety around the recent crisis, see Turner (2020).
13. They were more aesthetically pleasing than the ragtag rebel groups of Hutu peasants in the hills in the 1990s. While such rebel groups also have a certain exotic appeal, they are not likely to attract the sympathy of Western viewers to the same degree as middle-class Tutsi youth in jeans and clean T-shirts, waving banners with creative slogans.
14. Internet World Stats. 2017. “Burundi.” *Internet World Stats*. Retrieved 14 January 2023 from <https://internetworldstats.com/af/bi.htm>.
15. ITU Statistics. “Statistics: Individuals Using the Internet.” ITUWRC. Retrieved 14 January 2023 from <https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/stat/default.aspx>.
16. Internet World Stats, “Burundi.”
17. Elsewhere I have explored the emotional strain of being constantly online and in touch with the conflict while in exile (Berckmoes and Turner 2021; Turner and Berckmoes 2020).
18. For a fascinating study of such developments in Eritrea, see (Bernal 2014).
19. [https://www.facebook.com/pg/sosmediasburundi/about/?ref=page\\_internal](https://www.facebook.com/pg/sosmediasburundi/about/?ref=page_internal)
20. Quoted from Julia Steers. 2016. “How Burundi’s Activist Journalists Fill a News Void Using Facebook and Whatsapp.” *Quartz*, 23 February. Retrieved 14 January 2023 from [qz.com/622660/how-burundis-activist-journalists-fill-a-news-void-using-facebook-and-whatsapp/](http://qz.com/622660/how-burundis-activist-journalists-fill-a-news-void-using-facebook-and-whatsapp/)
21. Ibid.
22. See, for instance, AGnews ([burundi-agnews.org](http://burundi-agnews.org)). This organization also existed at the beginning of the twenty-first century and continues to disseminate very ethnicized theories about international plots against the president and the Hutu people.

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