

the colonial archive to provide a composite depiction of what amounts to a chronicle of genocide in an era and landscape viewed as unpeopled.

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Whispering truth to power: Everyday resistance to reconciliation in post-genocide Rwanda, by Susan Thomson. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2013. xxvii + 258 pp. \$27.95 (paperback). ISBN 978 0 29929 674 2. \$21.95 (e-book). ISBN 978 0 299 29673 5.

After Rwanda's 1994 genocide, policies of 'national unity and reconciliation' have been at the heart of the ruling RPF government's attempt to construct a strong Rwandan society through top-down decisions. Susan Thomson's political ethnography provides a fresh bottom-up perspective by giving voice to peasants from southern Rwanda who 'whisper their truth to power' in manifold ways. Some 82 per cent of Rwandans are subsistence farmers, often patronized as uneducated and non-political actors by the elites. Thomson argues that the question of 'national unity and reconciliation' is not one of ethnicity, as government would have it, but one of poverty. In pursuing their economic survival, the peasants Thomson spoke to recognize the RPF's social engineering efforts as a means of social control and manipulation, while trying to circumvent these policies by acts of 'everyday resistance'. Anticipating that her book might be perceived as controversial by many readers, Thomson attempts to forestall critique by beginning her monograph with an extensive introductory section that provides information about her personal and academic background and her long-term engagement with Rwanda. This makes her book methodologically strong and exemplary for situations of fieldwork under surveillance.

The book has six chapters, with a helpful glossary and an introduction to the 37 ordinary peasant people (her term) she worked with in 2006. After introducing the 'life history method' (Chapter 1), Thomson contextualizes the historical role of the state in Rwanda to demonstrate the continuity of structural violence, socio-economic hierarchy, and elite governance from pre-colonial times until today (Chapters 2 and 3). Chapter 4 discusses the mechanisms and impact of the policy of national unity and reconciliation on everyday life, which prepares for the author's empirical discussion of acts of everyday resistance (Chapter 5) with a particular focus on the specific instrument of the *gacaca* courts (Chapter 6). These courts served, Thomson argues, to consolidate RPF power rather than leading towards unity and reconciliation.

A leitmotif of Rwandan power relations is the position of intermediaries, who are of central relevance in this book, but who could have been discussed more thoroughly. Since colonial times, local officials (*ibirongozi*), occupy an intermediary position, imposing the rulers' will on the population.

Questions of mediating power relations are a classical topic in the field of peasant studies. Nearly 30 years after Scott's *Weapons of the Weak*, we know that strategies of avoidance are typical for (re)gaining some room for manoeuvre in a highly restricted environment, in which the state is either particularly strong or particularly weak. Thomson sheds light on the Rwandan peasantry, most relevantly discussing their perception of state policies. Even if her take on agency could have engaged more with theoretical debates on this topic, her focus is very valuable, demonstrating the opportunities peasants find to articulate dissent even in times of felt oppression.

The government expects peasants to perform and comply with the system, while the local officials secure its implementation. However, Thomson forcefully shows that even if the peasants' agency is limited, they find ways to protect their livelihoods and ensure their dignity. Their responses to social control range from avoidance practices to voicing dissent by playing dumb, employing the classical figure of 'the foolish' (*abasazi*).

Laudably, Thomson does not portray a homogeneous picture of the southern Rwandan peasantry, as she differentiates between the three lowest official categories of the social hierarchy: the poor (*abakene*), the destitute (*abatindi*), and the abject poor (*abatindi nyakujya*). However, this points to an underlying problem of the book: these categories are not emic notions and do not seem to provide the basis for self-identification among peasants, because they were introduced through top-down decision making and are reified in the author's presentation.

This manifests the authorial hand in choosing and arranging the empirical data. Interviews and life histories are moments of performance and often contain contradictions in themselves. The interview extracts and illustrations selected by Thomson are revealing and provide subtle and important insights into an all-too-often silenced group. However, at the same time, they seem to confirm too smoothly the arguments elaborated by the author and her own negative perceptions of the RPF. Thomson's assumptions of creative resistance by the poor in the face of strong state coercion might have been nuanced further by shedding more light on the role of local officials, who are depicted in a rather black-and-white manner in this book. Furthermore, her notion of the 'ordinary peasant' remains vague and, at times, confusing.

Overall, besides its methodological merits, this book's strength lies in the rich ethnographic data that allow us to gain insights into peasants' attitudes beyond the official rhetoric of unity and reconciliation. Nevertheless, many readers may find its bleak outlook controversial, grounded, it would seem, in the author's experiences of the Rwandan state.

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This book is a brave and boisterous attempt to challenge Africa to follow a clear-cut development trajectory in the face of its disappointing performance in the development