Introduction: information and disinformation in times of conflict

Once the chief vehicle for disseminating knowledge about Central Africa, the academic monograph has lost out against journalistic accounts and the 'grey literature' of aid agencies. The monograph was pronounced dead at a mid-1990s conference on *The Fate of Information in the Disaster Zone*.[1] While there are good reasons for accepting this verdict, I also note that it was made before Rwanda got 'involved' in Zaire in late 1996, that is, before journalists and aid workers realised, and admitted, that all had not been what it seemed. Today, the international community understands better that information and disinformation merge in times of conflict, and that confusion, often spread deliberately, is the inevitable outcome.

It is with processes of fusion and confusion that this book is concerned. I wish to demonstrate that there still is a place for the academic monograph in conflict situations, that there still is a need for scholarly analysis and reflexivity. The growing attraction of media- and aid-driven accounts notwithstanding – attractive because of their presumed immediate practical value – the writings of journalists and aid workers must not be taken at face value. They must, instead, be seen for what they are: products regularly conditioned by scant background information, tight deadlines, the demand for simplified commentary, and sometimes powerful manipulations. These conditions make it imperative that the quality of instant, 'real time' information be scrutinised. Quality control may mean checking for accuracy, or weighing claims about the present against recorded history, or supplying context. Mostly all three services are needed. This is what the present monograph aims to do with reference to the crisis in Rwanda and eastern Zaire. Monographs are not themselves immune from bias, of course not, yet it surely is time to apply to popular information outlets the standard of rigorous self-questioning to which the social sciences have become accustomed. Of the many truth claims that have emerged regarding Central Africa, we must ask: what claims are made? how do we know? why should we think the way we do?

The challenge is to understand and reflect on how contemporary knowledge is produced. A hard-hitting photograph may be worth a thousand words, as is sometimes said, but one thousand words may not be enough to convey

the photograph's full context. Moreover, even where it is clear to all that a photograph has a story to tell, we still need to ask, '*whose story*' does it tell? Niranjan Karnik's critique of disaster photography in the Great Lakes poses this question and concludes that disaster photography forms a specific type of Orientalist discourse in which suffering is universalised to suit the needs of both news and humanitarian agencies (Karnik 1998: 36). The photographer's input mostly goes undetected. Instantly readable, visually and conceptually, disaster images appeal to a vast humanitarian 'industry' and public who believe they tell a full and objective story. That images may obscure more than they reveal is not often considered; there may be a reason for this. In the Rwandan context, by portraying Rwandans as helpless victims in need, the West can cast itself in the role of altruistic saviour; a saviour stripped of ambiguity. What this portrayal obscures, though, is the full text, the context. The disaster photographs do not inform on how a Rwandan refugee crisis went virtually unreported for thirty years, how the 1994 genocide in Rwanda related to the 1972 genocide in Burundi and to fears of a repeat genocide in 1993, how the coffee crash of 1989 created massive despair among poor farmers, how the World Bank/International Monetary Fund (IMF) failed to bail Rwanda out (whereas Mexico and South Korea fared much better when their economies crashed), how the Tutsi-dominated Rwandese Patriotic Front (RPF) invaded Rwanda in 1990, how the 'international community' imposed multi-partyism in the mistaken belief that this meant democracy, how the UN succumbed to indifference when failing to intervene in Kigali in April 1994, how Rwanda's 1994 genocide was callously planned.

Context was equally lacking when Laurent Kabila triumphed in Kinshasa. Holding the moral highground as the champion of 'the Banyamulenge', an ethnic group threatened with extermination, being hailed by Nelson Mandela, having reached Kinshasa with the military help of Rwanda and Uganda, Kabila was regarded by powerful, mostly anglophone diplomats, and by many in the media and aid world, though by no means all, as Central Africa's new saviour. The pictures carried little text: Kabila arrived on the scene ready-made, the reincarnation of many promises (Newbury 1997). Once again, the world was not entitled to context. Not entitled to know, for instance, that Paul Kagame, Rwanda's military leader and vice-president (now president), had masterminded the so-called Banyamulenge rebellion, and that he had yielded to Museveni's insistence on Kabila becoming the rebellion's figurehead. Such information remained outside 'the frame' until 9 July 1997, when, in *The Washington Post*, Kagame revealed his position and role. Kabila's military force, moreover, was presented as strongly united, and the world, the anglophone world especially, seemed happy that this should be so. Awkward questions were not often asked, nor did members of the 'international community' consult the academic literature. Instead, it was Kigali's representation of events and conditions in eastern

Zaire which became authoritative. Few challenged the Kigali narrative and accompanying discourse, there seemed to be no need. And so, two years on, the world learned to its surprise and dismay that Kabila's campaign had failed, that the war needed to be relaunched – this time *against* Kabila. That famous photo opportunity when Mandela had raised Kabila's arm in victory had needed a larger frame, more context. The world had failed to appreciate that Kabila was 'a person as well as an image' (Newbury, 'Guerillas in the Mist', e-mail circular, 25 April 1997). The problem, David Newbury reflected, was

> that outsiders often imagine Kabila through some simple formula or 'outside' analogy – through some mechanism . . . that they can relate to and understand. The problem is that these intellectual mechanisms often are more closely tied to the person proposing them than to the events on the ground. (Newbury, 25 April 1997)

The images that appealed, in other words, were *imaginings the world wanted to see* and the 'morally pure' post-genocide regime in Kigali wanted to promote. These imaginings evoked Kabila the Pan-Africanist; Kabila the local freedom fighter; Kabila the 'anti-Mobutu'; Kabila a reincarnated Lumumba; Kabila a Museveni for Zaire. To those unfamiliar with Zairean politics, the imagery was so persuasive it made scrutinising 'Kabila' akin to moral crime. The imagery, though, as Newbury had warned, would turn out to be less than illuminating, saying indeed more about the world of the proposers than about the politics of the Great Lakes. Kabila was not a new Museveni (for unlike Museveni, he had not gained the respect and loyalty of the people in eastern Zaire, his home base); Kabila was not a reincarnated Lumumba (for unlike Lumumba, he never formulated policies for the people of Zaire); he may have been an 'anti-Mobutu', but so were millions of other Zaireans. Among them,

> the women who refused to pay illegal taxes at market, and those who refused the inflated and meaningless high-denomination bills, and those who demonstrated in the streets, or who stayed at home on *journées mortes*, and those who sang the caricatures of the *grosses légumes* in Kinshasa, as well as those who overtly addressed political issues. (Newbury, 25 April 1997)[2]

Recontextualisation, bringing these ordinary citizens back into the frame, permitted a new way of viewing the situation. As Newbury notes,

> if the ADFL has found power in the streets and taken it up, it is because the people put it there. It was popular struggle, popular resistance, and the use of many hidden transcripts over 32 years that emptied Mobutu's regime of legitimacy, it was the people, who in many small but meaningful actions, divested the regime of any meaningful authority, and ultimately of power. (Newbury, 25 April 1997)

Tragically, popular struggle remained outside the broad picture which media and aid workers conjured up, nor was attention paid to the many Zaireans who actively opposed Kabila. The media had eyes and ears only for those who

could be seen to be fighting, 'really' fighting, with sophisticated weapons and, sometimes, a sprinkle of magic. In short, during the Banyamulenge uprising in eastern Zaire, the world was told to accept *a particular version* of events; a version dressed up globally as 'the African way' of seeing and resolving things, a version promoted by the powerful New Pan-African lobby group and unequivocally adopted by its chief Western allies, the Clinton administration and British Government. That this authoritative version amounted to a particular, contestable view of society and history was not considered; that there were struggles within the struggle to oust Mobutu, struggles rooted in the modern history of eastern Zaire, was of no interest either. It was only later that the world asked questions about context, that journalists with authority queried the standard representation of Zaire's 'problem' and 'internal solution'. Suddenly, the familiar representation showed up as flawed. In May 1997, journalist Lindsey Hilsum reflected: 'In Central Africa we have a sense of knowing what is going on: aid agencies and reporters are on the ground and pictures are on the television screen. But it is misleading.'[3] More context, better context, would have made the images and messages less misleading.

In this book I am concerned with the process of recontextualisation. First and foremost, I aim to reflect on how 'Rwanda' and 'eastern Zaire' came to be re-imagined in 1994–96 through a synchronised production of knowledge, i.e. a process, pervasive even though not always consciously pursued, by which 'instant' journalists, diplomats, aid workers and academics accepted, formulated and spread images of Rwanda that chimed well with the RPF-led regime, now in power in Kigali. Wanting to put the record straight once and for all, the regime befriended international opinion makers who were cowed into believing some easy-to-grasp narratives regarding Central Africa's crises and solutions; narratives so seductively simple that no one new to the region thought of asking about their ideological underpinnings. Within the international community, these narratives were embraced, actively constructed, sometimes elaborated on, and spread. Most striking about these narratives was that they had little historical depth. By recontextualising the narratives the international community lived by in 1994–96, I hope to bring some insight into the process of knowledge construction. This insight should matter not just to those whose task it is to reflect on Central Africa's diverse reality, but to everyone committed to building a better Rwanda: re-building Rwanda cannot be done by the uninformed who believe in simple explanations.

A reflexive approach to understanding recent events in Rwanda and the Great Lakes requires a critical look at the origins, power and pervasiveness of the grand narratives that have come to dominate and shape Western perceptions of, and attitudes towards, the region. Part of the challenge here is to be critical of the persistent claims to objective knowledge, to be critical of social categories that group large entities or experiences. Social scientists now routinely question

claims to objective knowledge ('objective' therefore appearing in inverted commas), they increasingly expose such claims as ahistorical and homogenising. Presumed objective accounts of 'other cultures', it has been clear for a while, lack timeframes and pay insufficient attention to internal heterogeneity.

But the debate has progressed further. Grounding one's analysis is not just a question of accessing a plurality of local voices, the critic must also ask whether anyone, outsiders especially, can have the right to speak for someone else. Within social anthropology, my discipline, the emerging consensus is that anthropological (and all outsider) representations are embedded in power relations between North and South. The implication is that researchers should relinquish the right to 'speak for' other groups, that is groups whose points of view the anthropologist has learned to share (Cornwall and Lindisfarne 1994: 43–5). In line with this position, I do not claim to have the right to speak *on behalf of* 'the people of Rwanda', an excessively homogenising label anyway, but I do claim the right to speak *to* members of the 'international community' since they need to take responsibility for the representations they accept, bring into the world or help sustain.

To Edward Said we owe the wisdom that untinged, objective writing is an impossibility. Said, however, also reassured international observer-commentators that they can be better aware of the circumstances of their actuality, and hence less influenced by it (Said 1993: 136–7). In the context of research in Central Africa, Said's optimism has been shared by V. Y. Mudimbe, who announced, already in the early 1980s, that official orthodoxies inherited from the colonial period were being challenged both by African scholars and by a new generation of Westerners. This new generation, Mudimbe wrote, included Jean-Pierre Chrétien, Bogumil Jewsiewicki and Jean-Claude Willame, researchers who were

> more conscious of the objective limitations that their own subjectivity and regional socio-historic determinations impose[d] on their dealings with African matters. . . . [They knew an end had to come to] the dialogue with 'big brothers' [which had] been from the beginning ambiguous, made up of mutual understanding and rejection, collaboration and suspicion. (Mudimbe 1985: 206)

In collaborating with African scholars, this new generation was expected to boost the quest for 'new alternatives, regional compatibilities and, above all, the possibility of a new economy between power and knowledge' (Mudimbe 1985: 209). Mudimbe's optimism, formulated specifically within a debate on African gnosis and philosophy, spoke of the necessity of new epistemological arrangements that would herald the cultural renaissance of African nations.

But what does the possibility of a new economy between power and knowledge mean in terms of the positioning of contemporary African scholars *vis-à-vis* political processes *within* Africa and the world at large? Should we, outsiders,

not ask of these scholars the very same questions that Mudimbe and Said have asked of Western scholars and their representations? Should academic 'outsiders' not ask how the agendas and findings of African scholarly research are conditioned internally? And ask, too: which systems of knowledge are emerging, which failing, and why? Who speaks for whom, and why? The inquiry into cultural hegemony must not be confined to the question of how constructs of 'the Other' result from power relations embedded in the colonial past, for intellectual hegemony exists not only between regions and cultures, but also within them. The renaissance Mudimbe announced is a process just begun. A process, moreover, which can easily be derailed by dominant interest groups from within the formerly colonised regions and states, groups which may well themselves make use of the (old) Western paradigms. (Old paradigm: 'Reality is what I say it is. Because I say so.') If the economically and politically dominant 'West' enjoyed the prerogative that it could construct reality under colonialism, and claim objectivity for its constructions, then why should we not expect to see the ascendancy of post-colonial elites that occupy the same privileged niche because they too claim to be rational in their epistemology?

The danger that certain post-colonial representations gain currency and legitimacy simply because they have replaced those of the erstwhile coloniser, must not be dismissed lightly. Moreover, as recent research on the construction of policy discourse in colonial Zambia, then Northern Rhodesia, has shown, it would be wrong to pretend that colonial constructs were ever free of local inputs. This was particularly so where 'indirect rule' became the norm. In *Cutting Down Trees*, Moore and Vaughan (1994) demonstrate for Zambia's Northern Province that the construction of a policy discourse on rural development, a discourse anchored in the presumed non-sustainability of agricultural and moral systems, had arisen with the active participation of the Bemba political elite. Colonial administrators, agricultural scientists and anthropologists, missionaries and Bemba chiefs had all worked together to produce the discourse that spoke of a spiralling decline, ecologically and socially. The local political elite took an active part in constructing 'the Other', Bemba-ness in this case, because it too, like the European coloniser, aspired to be in control.[4]

Concentrating on Rwanda during the 1994–96 crisis, this book examines the manner in which members of the 'international community' have engaged with the politics and culture of the Great Lakes region. What images have they accepted and spread regarding the nature of Rwandan society? What have they said about Rwandan history? How has the refugee crisis been portrayed, and what has the impact been on the outcome of that crisis? How does the international community understand Rwanda's post-war economy? How were the Kivu 'crisis' and its 'local solution' (October 1996 onwards) presented to the world?

In answering these questions, I shall focus on how key actors in the drama – national and international leaders, foreign diplomats, humanitarians, journalists,

aid workers and academics – have accessed information, processed information, spread information. And sometimes disinformation. Thus we learn how imaginings about Rwanda were created and spread through the media (revealing partiality and/or ignorance); created and spread, too, in diplomatic circles (by diplomats who 'needed' to simplify); in the camps for internally displaced people and refugees (by humanitarians with routine approaches to crisis management); through statements by Rwanda's new leaders; through academic avenues (by instant experts with limited knowledge of Rwandan society, history and politics); through development activities organised around rehabilitation and reconstruction (by technocrats whose familiarity with the region is mostly non-existent). In one way or other, all have contributed significant words and actions towards a systematic re-imagining of Rwanda.

Most crucially, and providing the *raison d'être* for the structure of this book, the various imaginings have cross-fertilised one another to produce a remarkable degree of 'politically correct' consistency around the concept of social identity. Where people 'come from' and where they are 'going', so to speak, has been an essential preoccupation of all who have sought to understand, analyse and comment on Rwanda. In this respect, media and diplomatic imaginings of the place and its people reveal considerable affinity with the thinking behind current policies for land reform, with the way humanitarians engaged with the Rwandan refugee crisis, and with the way academics unfamiliar with Rwanda before the genocide have sought to comprehend what went wrong. From a scholarly point of view, the critical issue is how this global, interconnected search for understanding and consistency has dealt with the problem of context. As the chapters in this book reveal, the search has resulted in a conspicuous hesitancy to consider detailed contexts; analysts and commentators have opted for 'easy handles' on some very complex issues.

At the heart of this hesitancy lies a mixture of institutional incapacity or demand (e.g. media reportings need to be crisp; humanitarian work cannot afford to be 'philosophical') and moral sympathy with the people of Rwanda who emerged from the terrible tragedy of 1994. There were perfectly good reasons for this moral sympathy: besides the scale of the tragedy and its suffering, there was the undeniable fact that the crisis had been planned with massive intellectual complicity within Rwanda and an ultra-extreme national media in which 'Hutu Power' academics played a key role (see Chrétien 1995). The five years leading up to the genocide had seen a considerable radicalisation in local academic and political reflections on Rwanda; a pro-Hutu radicalisation which, after the genocide, would be construed as merely the continuation of three decades of post-independence research. Against this background of radicalisation, international caution in accepting academic reflection on 'the problem' of Rwanda was not only to be expected, it was also perfectly correct. The international response, broadly speaking, was to accept a clean

slate position on Rwanda and to give legitimate voice to the RPF, which had halted the genocide. Accepting the proverbial clean slate, Rwanda's new leaders and many in the international community then returned to a model of Rwandan society and history popularised in the 1950s.

The present book maintains that post-independence research on Rwanda must not now be labelled 'all bad' and swept under the carpet, that there is in fact much of continued value if analysts and commentators wish to move towards a better informed understanding of the transformations on which Rwanda has embarked. There is a need, in other words, to 'recontextualise' the rather simplifying imaginings which international opinion has not only absorbed but also actively helped to generate, reinforce and spread.

1 Build-up to war and genocide: society and economy in Rwanda and eastern Zaire

The eruption of conflict and civil war in the 1990s, in both Rwanda and eastern Zaire, had its origin in modern struggles for power and wealth. The world, however, easily overlooked this modern origin, since the confrontations it witnessed appeared to have taken on strongly ethnicised, seemingly 'tribal' overtones and justification. The Rwandan 1994 genocide in particular, more than the fighting in eastern Zaire (1996 onwards), was for too long and at too great a cost portrayed by the media as rooted in tribalism. Rwanda's bloodbath was not tribal. Rather it was a distinctly modern tragedy, a degenerated class conflict minutely prepared and callously executed. Most of the world failed to see it that way, and continued to think of the conflict – this after all was Africa – in terms of 'centuries-old tribal warfare'.

The power of shamelessly twisted ethnic argument for the sake of class privilege was demonstrated most shockingly in the blatant imaginings about history that galvanised Rwanda's 'Hutu Power' extremists. These extremists killed Rwanda's Tutsi and sent their bodies 'back to Ethiopia' via the Nyabarongo and Akagera rivers. The imagined origin of 'the Tutsi', along with their (poorly understood) migrations and conquest of Rwanda, were evoked by power-crazed Hutu politicians to instil 'ethnic hatred' in the very people they themselves oppressed: the victims of class oppression were spurred on to kill a minority group which the oppressors had labelled 'the real enemy'. Some 800,000 Tutsi and moderate Hutu who declared their sympathy with the Rwandese Patriotic Front (RPF) were slaughtered in a matter of three months. Today, those who govern post-genocide Rwanda also imagine the past in order to make sense of the present, but they do so in different, more subtle ways. Post-genocide leaders regard Rwanda's pre-colonial past as something of a golden era, a state of social harmony later corrupted by Europeans. Vital to the justification of minority rule, their message is delivered in a well-rehearsed manner and style, marked sometimes by omission (of well-established counter-evidence) and sometimes by disregard for context. Complexity and context are continuously screened out of contemporary representations of 'the Old Rwanda', as could be seen, for instance, in official testimonies just prior to Zaire's civil war (detailed in Chapter 5). Against available empirical evidence, the Rwandan government's

representation of the historically evolved border separating the two countries evoked a late nineteenth-century situation in which Rwanda and eastern Zaire had been linked in political harmony.

Distortion, or the screening out of complexity and context, are techniques that work best in situations where confusion – about people's past, their identities, their rights – has been institutionalised and built into the fabric of everyday life. In situations of acute poverty, and both Rwanda and Zaire hit extreme levels of poverty in the late 1980s, institutionalised confusion becomes a weapon that power-hungry politicians wield to significant personal advantage and with deadly accuracy. In the early 1990s Zaire's Kivu province exemplified this power of confusion. On the brink of so-called 'ethnic' war, Kivu had an extraordinarily complex array of contradictory viewpoints on people and their entitlements. Not only did two quite different systems of land ownership and land access co-exist, but they co-existed in the midst of a bewildering range of 'conflicting laws and legal interpretations concerning land rights' (Fairhead 1997: 58). Claims to land depended on whether the claimant was considered 'autochthonous' or 'foreign', the latter being a rapidly expanding category. By the early 1990s, a sizeable proportion of Kivu's Kinyarwanda-speaking population, or Banyarwanda, had questionable identity and rights. The growth of this institutionalised confusion over land rights, combined with the 1981 withdrawal of citizenship for people of Rwandan origin, made it easy for so-called autochthones to recoup, often by violent means, the ancestral lands they had previously lost or claimed they had lost.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Rwanda, too, was hit by institutionalised confusion. Its land shortages and disputes derived more from straightforward population pressure than from a complex political economy comparable to that of Kivu, yet here as well the laws regarding land were remarkably open to interpretation. As the country descended into economic chaos, the list of social categories barred from access to land was known to be growing rapidly. Like in Kivu, this generalised confusion played into the hands of the wealthy, who, when the crisis deepened, expertly reframed the nature of the crisis – from class struggle to ethnic struggle – in order to buy the loyalty of the oppressed. In combination, acute poverty, externally induced economic malaise and the ruthlessness of embattled politicians gave rise to a restless, deadly social layer of desperately poor, easy-to-manipulate young thugs.

Reframing the nature of economic hardship and class struggle means 'remembering' the past: who's who? where do my neighbours come from? who are they, really? what rights do they have, really? and are they not cultivating land my ancestors once owned? These questions are not unique to the conflict in Central Africa, but they are at the core of that continuous reinterpretation of reality which sustains the potential for conflict. As a result, this chapter is not just an overview of the local scene and its complexities, but also