

Modern Materials for Dwelling: The Evolution of Durability and Domesticity in Rwandan Housing

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Both top-down mandates and bottom-up choices have shaped Rwandan dwellings over the course of decades of transformation, throughout which the solidification of building materials has served as a visual signifier of “progress.” Although their programs exhibited different scales and methods, both the Belgian colonial authorities and the post-independence Rwandan state have sought to legitimize their rule by shaping the domestic lives of the masses through the material improvement of dwellings. However, as “modern” building materials have become more accessible, the Rwandan people have also willingly exercised the options available to them to build homes that match their aspirations. And in this they have been influenced by the experience of members of the Rwandan diaspora, many of whom have returned to the country since being forced to flee during the 1994 genocide. Meanwhile, as vernacular building methods have evolved according to the needs and desires of multiple agents, “traditional” materials and forms have been sequestered into specific spaces such as museums and tourist facilities in an act of distancing from the past, helping to solidify Rwanda’s claims of modernization.

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In the southern province of Rwanda, the village of Mayange takes the form of a cluster of small mud-plastered homes with corrugated metal roofs (FIG. 1). Although only forty kilometers south of Rwanda’s capital of Kigali, it seems a world away. In comparison to Kigali’s bustling traffic and shiny new glass and steel towers, Mayange appears to be quiet and remote — and not a place that one would associate with change. However, little of life in the village today actually resembles life in Rwanda a century ago. Mayange is also not an iso-



FIGURE 1. A contemporary house in the town of Mayange, Rwanda. Photo by author, 2017.

lated rural enclave, but a Millennium Village highly connected to international networks. As one of Rwanda's official "Reconciliation Villages," it is also a planned community where genocide perpetrators and survivors purposely live side by side. In return for demonstrating reconciliation to outside audiences, the villagers receive foreign aid for health and education.

But notions of "progress" are not only acted out by the village's inhabitants; they are also embedded in its buildings. And in this regard, the houses lining Mayange's dirt streets — like vernacular dwellings across the country — reflect a combination of external and internal influences that have profoundly changed Rwandan vernacular architecture, redefining notions of "modern" dwelling according to specific ideals of durability and domesticity. In short, Mayange is an archetype of contemporary settlement in Rwanda.

In this article, I explore the impact of both top-down mandates and bottom-up choices on the transformation of Rwandan dwellings over time, an evolution in which the solidification of building materials has served as a visual signifier of "progress." Historically, although their programs had different scales and methods, both Rwanda's former Belgian colonial authorities and its various post-independence governments have sought to legitimize their rule by shaping the domestic lives of the masses through the material improvement of dwellings. However, they have not been the only agents of change. As "modern" building materials have become more accessible in an increasingly monetized and connected society, Rwandans themselves have also willingly exercised the options available to them to build homes that match their aspirations. And as vernacular building methods have evolved, "traditional" materials and forms have been sequestered into specific spaces where they are targeted to particular audiences — often outsiders — in an act of distancing from the past that helps solidify Rwanda's claims of modernization.

Comparing the traditional hut which was prevalent across Rwanda until the latter half of the twentieth century

to typical vernacular houses today in Rwanda, one can see how much they have changed over time (FIG. 2, REFER TO FIG. 1). One obvious difference is shape: the traditional dwellings were circular in plan, while contemporary houses



FIGURE 2. Re-creation of a traditional hut within the open-air museum setting of the Rulindo Cultural Center in Rwanda. Photo by author, 2016.

are rectangular. But the other major difference is material. Traditional houses were built entirely of organic materials: the walls were usually woven or made in a wattle-and-daub style out of branches, reeds, or straw mixed with soil; and the home was covered by a thatched roof.¹ Today, however, houses in Rwanda are most commonly built out of mud block or bricks, with either a metal or tile roof; and greater incomes allow the use of concrete. In addition, today's houses are usually clustered together in groups and small villages, a different pattern from that of older settlements, which were more dispersed on the land.² This article will examine how, and why, these changes came about.

TRADITIONAL MATERIALS

Visitors to Rwanda nowadays can generally only see traditional-style dwellings inside an institution charged with the quarantine of past from present: the museum. Re-created huts can, for example, be found at the Rulindo Cultural Center, the King's Palace Museum, and the Ethnographic Museum of Rwanda (REFER TO FIG. 2). Inside the Ethnographic Museum, there is also a large gallery devoted to the traditional Rwandan crafts of weaving and pottery. In this gallery, woven panels and baskets of all different shapes, sizes and patterns catch the eye with their dynamic patterns and precision of detail. Museum visitors, peering through the glass of the display cabinets, typically marvel at the notion that human hands could create such intricate objects. The gallery's information placards further point out that weaving — or, more specifically, wickerwork (meaning the weaving of organic plant materials such as twigs, reeds, etc.) — was not just a

simple craft used to produce functional objects, but “the most remarkable artistic production of ancient Rwanda.”³ And the historian Célestin Kanimba Misago has noted that “the shape of the object, the technical quality and the finishing touches were the criteria used to judge an object's value.”⁴ But weaving was also integral to dwelling, as both the dwelling itself and many of the objects inside it were woven by the residents and their community. Thus, the roof and walls of the traditional house, as well as interior partitions, floor mats, fences, baskets, and decorative wall panels, were all part of a cohesive material culture (FIG. 3).⁵

In traditional Rwandan society, families lived inside a compound which consisted of the *inzu* (house), *urugo* (front yard), and sometimes also an *igikali* (back yard). The compound would also contain small auxiliary structures used for storing grain or keeping animals. The compound was enclosed by a natural hedge or a fence made of reeds, and sited in the center of the family's plot of land for ease of access to crops, which were planted in concentric zones around it.⁶ In traditional settlements, these homesteads were scattered among the hills; and although members of the same patrilineal extended family would be somewhat clustered together, there would typically be significant distance in between these groups.⁷

At the end of the nineteenth century these construction methods and settlement patterns had been practiced fairly consistently for generations. This was true both for the Hutu, who were originally agriculturalists, and the Tutsi, who were originally pastoralists. However, over time, the two groups had grown more and more alike in lifestyle, and in some areas they *both* kept cattle and cultivated fields.⁸ While there was some regional and class-based variation in size and



FIGURE 3. Hutu weavers at work in front of their dwelling; evidence of a coherent and refined material culture. Source: Collection RMCA Tervuren.



FIGURE 4. Construction of a Tutsi dwelling in Rwanda. Source: Collection RMCA Tervuren; photo Provost.



FIGURE 5. The Mwami (King) of Rwanda in front of his residence. Source: Collection RMCA Tervuren; photo R.P. Monnens S.J.

detail, the dwellings of Rwanda's two major ethnic groups — the Hutu (REFER TO FIG. 3); and the Tutsi (FIGS. 4, 5) — were thus largely similar in form and materiality.⁹

From a construction standpoint, circular dwellings are fairly simple to lay out, requiring only a center point and a constant radius, which can be measured with a length of rope. Once a site was cleared, the perimeter of a house would thus typically be inscribed on the ground using a rope tied to a stake. Circular plans can also help moderate external temperatures, because they offer the minimum possible wall surface for thermal bridging, and they can be very stable in earthquakes (indeed, Rwanda is in a seismically active area). However, the circle also had important cosmological significance in Rwandan dwellings. At the center of the woven ceiling were four concentric rings which symbolized heaven

(*ijuru*), space (*ikirere*), earth (*isi*), and the world of death (*ikuzimu*). The rings were the most important architectural element of the house, and builders took great care in weaving them.¹⁰ Once the ceiling was completed, thin wooden pillars would be set in place to support it, and the whole dwelling would be covered in a thick layer of thatch that met the ground in a dome-like fashion. Finally, once a soothsayer had pronounced the house to be properly complete, ceremonies would be held to inaugurate it.¹¹

Obviously, a house made of thatch does not last forever. Ongoing maintenance was a part of life, and periodic rebuilding was a communal activity. A Rwandan architect described to me the way his mother remembered her community coming together to rebuild a thatched dwelling when necessary:

I talk to my mother about this sometimes, she tells me about how when she was growing up, people lived in thatched houses. They had fire which was burning 24/7, so houses would catch fire. Fires were not something that was seen as something which needs to be prevented, right? Of course, you had to manage it so it doesn't kill people, but my mom told me that sometimes you'd wake up one morning and see, "Oh, this person's house got burned down." What would happen is everybody would come to your rescue — someone brings a tree, someone brings the vine, someone brings something else, they come clear the land — the same day, they will have the house completed, and you will sleep in it that night. It was a communal process.¹²

For these traditional homes, repairs were to be expected, but materials were locally abundant, and strong social ties ensured that labor was readily available. Indeed, a dwelling was commonly understood to have a certain degree of innate ephemerality, and replacement in kind was a necessary part of the cycle.

Contemporary researchers should not be quick to romanticize these traditional dwellings, however, or to assume that the indigenous people did not want something better. A variety of agents have now pushed this cyclical, communitarian building culture out of practical existence, to the extent that it exists today only in museums and in the archive of public memory. But if the role of indigenous agency is not factored into this situation, half the picture is missing. Thus, Joseph Godlewski has argued, in the context of Nigeria, that “by nostalgically privileging and elevating an era prior to European contact, [some historians of architecture have] ironically removed indigenous agency from later periods of fragmentation, [erroneously] labeling Europeans as the sole catalysts of change.”¹³ As in Nigeria, Europeans were thus not the only agents of change in Rwanda. While colonial authorities in Rwanda may have planted the seeds of transformation in the form and material of dwellings, comprehensive changes only took wider effect with the participation of the indigenous population.

“DURABLE CONSTRUCTION MATERIALS” IN THE COLONIAL PERIOD

When the first European explorers arrived in Rwanda in the 1890s, they found it to be a highly organized kingdom with a common language, which had been in existence for at least five hundred years. Curiously, this initial contact happened after the region had already been assigned to Germany as a protectorate at an 1890 conference of colonial powers held to resolve the status of any lands still in dispute after the “Scramble for Africa.” Following Germany’s defeat in World War I, however, the League of Nations gave Belgium the

mandate to govern the combined territory of Ruanda-Urundi (comprising the territories of what are now the nations of Rwanda and Burundi).¹⁴

Although a number of German missionaries and colonial officials were present in the country from the mid-1890s, it was only following the war that the expansion of missionary activity and the presence of Belgian colonial authorities sparked an era of major changes to vernacular dwellings. In any situation where different cultures come into contact, ideas are sure to be transferred. However, Belgian ideas about building materials and techniques were not only absorbed by the Rwandan people, they were also actively transferred through programs aimed to establish new housing patterns for the indigenous population. In particular, colonial administrators focused on the promotion of “durable construction materials.” Today, archival documents may help illuminate these officials’ criticisms of local building materials, which kinds of materials they considered more suitable, what kinds of programs they implemented, and their perception of the response of the *indigènes*.

In their reports, the Belgian authorities typically described indigenous dwellings with words like “rudimentary” and “primitive.” And they frequently referred to indigenous dwellings as “unhealthy,” stating that the indigenous people “too often show an incredible negligence in the construction and especially in the maintenance of their dwellings,” and that they “have habitually ignored or neglected to observe the most basic rules of hygiene.”¹⁵ Colonial authorities further noted that the indigenous huts were in constant need of “costly repairs.”¹⁶ On the basis of these analyses they determined the comfort of the indigenous population to be “extremely reduced.” But they also acknowledged that this situation seemed satisfactory to the *indigènes*, who were “living almost constantly outside, not conceiving family life like us, leading an extremely rough existence, [as] they only ask the hut to shelter them against the freshness of the nights, the excessive heat of the day or the violence of tornadoes.”¹⁷ Through statements like this, the Belgian administrators implied that a change in building materials, to make dwellings healthier and more comfortable, might also persuade the *indigènes* to spend more time indoors, and so cultivate the kind of nuclear family life that seemed more appropriate by European standards.

Prior to World War II, colonial housing initiatives mostly focused on housing for indigenous civil servants, like clerks and police. These were typically very simple one-room dwellings, often arranged in contiguous rows or as duplexes (FIG. 6).¹⁸ In the late 1940s, however, the colonial authorities began to consider how to improve the dwellings of the masses — shifting their focus from one-off construction projects to the development of replicable prototypes and long-term building programs. In 1947, on a hill called Jari outside of Kigali, colonial administrators thus convened a meeting attended by 38 local residents, to whom they presented several options for a round “house for *indigènes*.” The *indigènes*, however,

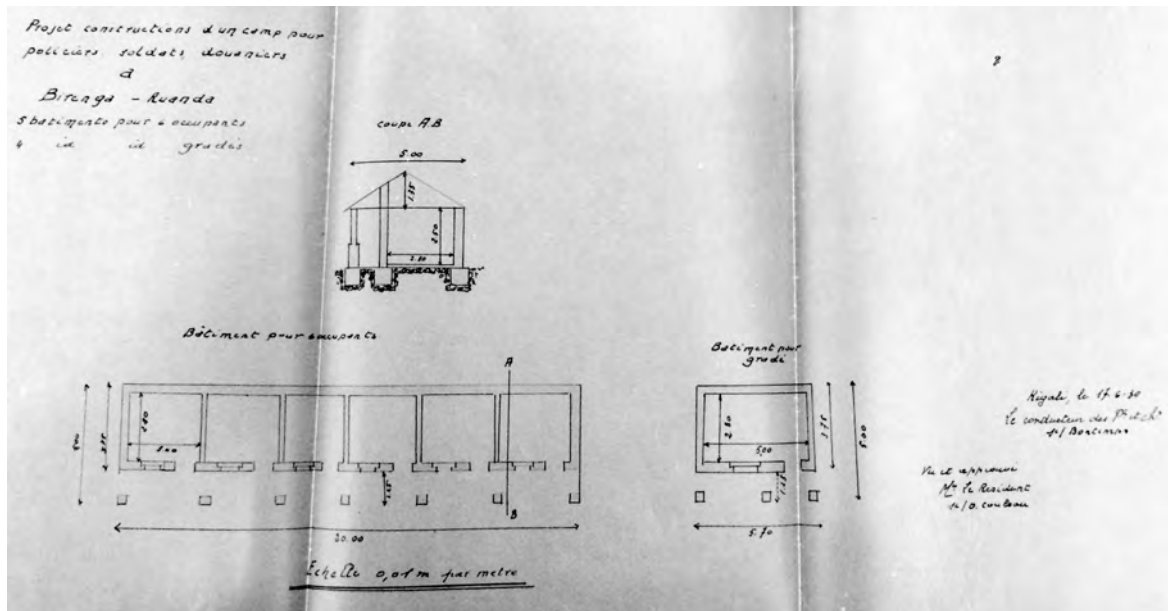


FIGURE 6. “Camp construction project for police, soldiers, customs officers at Birenga – Rwanda” (1930), showing one type of housing that would be provided for male workers without their families: simple rooms laid out in a linear fashion. Source: Africa Archive at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Belgium.

testified that they would not cooperate in the program if the roof were to be thatched, because thatch could rot or become infested with rodents or insects. As the Belgian government’s Resident George Sandrart reported: “Learning that no objection is made to the thatched roof being replaced by tiles, the interest on the part of the listeners became much more marked, the atmosphere changed radically, and it is by no means exaggerated to speak of enthusiasm.”¹⁹ Thus

it was that one of the major changes to vernacular dwelling materials in Rwanda — the shift from vegetal to hard roofing — was fostered by the colonial authorities, but also very much the result of a decision made by the local population. (Of course, it should be noted that the indigenous reactions in these documents were filtered through the colonial perspective; but it does seem there was a clear preference indicated.)



FIGURE 7. This round dwelling matches the description of the first kind of house to be built in 1947 as part of a colonial housing program: circular in plan, but constructed with solid materials (bricks, stones, and tiles). Source: Collection RMCA Tervuren; photo J. Mulders (Inforcongo), RMCA Tervuren ©.

Following the meeting, tests were done at Jari to construct a round dwelling with smoothly plastered baked-brick walls, exterior brick columns, a tile roof, and an exterior porch (FIG. 7).²⁰ But when this first house turned out to be more expensive than hoped, the territorial administrator A. Van Hoeck suggested that the round form be replaced with a rectangular one, because he believed (for unknown reasons) that a porch would not be necessary on a rectangular house — thus eliminating the cost of the foundation stone, brick, and tile needed for this outdoor space.²¹ This was in turn a key decision in changing the indigenous housing program from round to rectangular forms (FIGS. 8, 9). Van Hoeck then testified that the indigenes were again enthusiastic about this change, and in fact they even preferred the rectangular house — although he did not specify their reasons.²²

The initial response to these tests seemed promising, but to develop the program on a wider scale, the Belgians needed the cooperation of local authorities. Although European agents could be assigned to oversee the construction of the houses, they were only able to visit each construction site a few days per month due to their small number and large areas of oversight. Meanwhile, the procurement of materials, the erecting of the structure, etc., was controlled by local Rwandan chiefs and their deputies. A note written by Van Hoeck in 1948 thus asserted the importance of getting Rwandan leaders on board by ensuring that these leaders would be the first to receive new houses. As Van Hoeck wrote:

FIGURE 8. *The Belgians switched to a rectangular form for their indigenous housing program, believing it would cost less to construct. Here, a nurse and his family pose in front of their house in Kisenyi, 1947. Source: Collection RMCA Tervuren; photo E. Lebiéd (Inforcongo), RMCA Tervuren ©.*



FIGURE 9. *Houses for clerks in the colonial administration, constructed by the government in Usumbura (the capital of Ruanda-Urundi, located in what is now present-day Burundi). Source: Collection RMCA Tervuren; photo J. Mulders (Inforcongo), RMCA Tervuren ©.*



*For more than one year that I have been occupied with these constructions, the experience has proven to me that this work is impossible without the total collaboration and even enthusiasm of the customary authorities. [. . .] And it is understandable, that this one [the chief or deputy], living himself in a hut, does not dedicate himself with all the devotion required by this task, if the Administration does not begin to procure him a clean house of durable materials.*²³

The Belgian strategy was thus first to ensure the program was accepted by local authorities in the expectation that when people in the community saw their leaders living in these new houses, they would aspire to the same. The following year, the territory administrator for Ruhengeri, W. Antonissen, wrote that the one hundred houses constructed in his territory in 1948–49 were “exclusively for natives who asked for it without any pressure”; and that “the idea has been launched, and the indigenes can see with their own eyes what they can achieve with some effort. In my view, the sufficiently evolved indigenes, having already presented certain guarantees of cleanliness and financial comfort, will themselves solicit the help of the government for building a house. . . .”²⁴ Thus the new homes were linked to the *evolûés*, a class of “enlightened,” Westernized indigenes who legitimized Belgian rule by demonstrating the success of its “civilizing mission.”²⁵ By associating the new style of house with the elite of the indigenous population, the Belgians intended it to become aspirational for the masses.

However, it turned out that not all indigenous subjects were enthusiastic about the housing program. In practice, the new houses were out of reach for all but the wealthiest. As Antonissen wrote: “This program only concerns the category of rich indigenes. Indeed the current price for a 3 room house of 3,5 [m] x 3,25 [m] is 7,000 Fr, including 1,000 to 1,500 Fr to be paid upfront with the balance to be paid in 3 annuities. It is evident that the masses do not have the resources necessary to meet such expenses.”²⁶ Furthermore, the lower classes had largely been requisitioned into forced unpaid labor to keep the prices of commodities down. The program to build houses for the wealthy thus bred resentment, as it became increasingly clear that poor farmers with little chance to gather the necessary capital were unlikely to ever obtain their own houses.²⁷ As those with lower incomes were typically Hutu and those with higher incomes were typically Tutsi, this was one of the ways in which colonial policies later helped breed ethnic tension. As a result of this disillusionment, several territorial administrators also began to report disinterest in the housing programs. In one territory, the local people were even reported to say, “*n’umulimo w’abazungu* [it is an affair of Europeans].”²⁸

Indigenous Rwandans were justified in feeling that the new houses were essentially “European.” It is clear from archival reports and correspondence that when developing housing for the indigenous population, the Belgians prioritized

certain values: cost, climatic suitability, and hygiene. The socio-cultural customs or aesthetic preferences of the indigenous population were not considered. Put another way, the Belgians felt that the indigenous population should change their dwelling habits to fit their new houses rather than have their new houses fit their traditional ways of life. The aforementioned remark that the indigenes were “living almost constantly outside, *not conceiving family life like us*” (emphasis added) indeed presented a condescending “othering” of indigenous domesticity.²⁹ Thus it is likely that one reason the colonial housing program dispensed with exterior porches was the hope that the interiorization of domestic life would place an increased emphasis on the nuclear family. This might also help downplay communal or clan ties, breaking society down into smaller units to help prevent an anti-colonial uprising. The domestic habits of the indigenes were further Westernized through training programs like the *foyer social*, which taught married African women living in colonial cities how to properly keep their homes. This program was proudly touted in annual reports to the United Nations and helped to legitimize Belgium’s control of this territory. By appearances, the “natives” were becoming more civilized, and to European eyes this validated Belgium’s continued rule over them.³⁰

The colonial housing initiatives also had a particular focus on “durable construction materials” (a phrase noted in dozens of archival documents). And this notion was similarly found in projects to convert communal buildings to more “durable” structures (FIGS. 10, 11). However, one territorial administrator noted in 1948 that some indigenous residents of Byumba resisted living in brick houses because these might prevent them from emigrating to better land if necessary.³¹ A thatched hut, which needed to be periodically reconstructed to begin with, could easily be rebuilt at a new site. But a house built of heavy stone, bricks, and tiles contained a lot more embedded labor and equity, and would be much harder to move or abandon. The high cost of the homes also ensured that people were unlikely to abandon them. Durable building materials thus suggested an underlying agenda for the fixing of indigenous people to their land.

Across the African continent, by the mid-twentieth century cities had also become potential sites of anti-colonial dissent and local uprising.³² Belgian authorities, however, saw they could potentially avoid this if they kept native Africans from settling in cities en masse. Although the Belgians did establish necessary administrative centers, they thus pursued a range of “anti-urbanization” policies when it came to their African colonies. These policies were largely aimed at controlling rural-to-urban migration and preventing too many rural dwellers from moving to cities. The 1930s saw the introduction of a number of measures designed to control and monitor movements of Africans in the Belgian colonies, including pass laws, censuses, and taxation. Africans had to pay taxes to visit the city, and authorization papers were necessary for any travel. These were all means “to keep ‘custom-

FIGURE 10. “BEFORE” (Original caption: “Here in the administrative center of Buyoga the old seed storage shed, now replaced by a building in durable materials”), 1949. Source: Collection RMCA Tervuren; photo M. Labiau (Inforcongo), 1949, RMCA Tervuren ©.



FIGURE 11. “AFTER” (Original caption: “Here in the administrative center of Buyoga the new seed conservation shed”), 1949. Source: Collection RMCA Tervuren; photo M. Labiau (Inforcongo), 1949, RMCA Tervuren ©.



ary’ people in ‘customary’ space.”³³ Although it was not explicitly stated, the initiatives to build indigenous houses with more durable materials were another means to keep people more firmly rooted in place.

As a result of the disconnect between the intended scope of the program and the actual ability of the masses to pay for the new houses, the Belgian colonial housing program turned out to be very limited, however. For example, nearly two years after the first house was built at Jari, 21 houses for indigenes had been built at Ndorwa I — a settlement with a total of 3,500 households.³⁴ In general, Belgium prioritized the economic exploitation of its colonies above all else, and its interest in investing in construction or infrastructure for any other purpose was limited. In addition, while the Belgians envisioned the indigenous population making financial contributions toward construction costs, most Rwandans were subsistence farmers who did not generate sufficient cash flow to save up for a house. In essence, Rwandan society was not yet monetized enough for the program.

However, even very low-income indigenes began during the colonial period to build their own homes — outside of

the program — in a more solid manner, changing from walls made of woven reeds to walls made of timber framing with smaller horizontal members interwoven into a framework that would be packed with clay.³⁵ And within fifty years, as wood became increasingly scarce, some builders dispensed with the framing altogether and began to build only with adobe blocks dried in the sun.³⁶ The indigenes also began building of their own accord in the rectangular form. Thus by the time Francois and Annie Bart carried out a detailed study in the late 1980s (more than 25 years after Rwandan independence), they found that two-thirds of dwellings in Rwanda were rectangular, and that 54 percent of dwellings had either a tile or corrugated metal roof. They also observed that these newer forms and materials were directly connected with access to money from off-farm endeavors.³⁷ In other words, the wealthier classes were choosing to build rectangular homes made of nonvegetal materials.

In the end, therefore, while the Belgians never managed to build housing in Rwanda on a large scale, they did help to associate certain kinds of housing (durable, nonorganic, rectangular) with higher status — by building them first for civil

servants, and then providing them to local authorities and the wealthier classes. But, as stated earlier, the desire for more durable materials came from the indigenous residents as well as from the colonizers. In 1948 the Belgian territory administrator of Nyanza thus noted that some chiefs and indigenes had been conducting their own initiatives. For example, four hundred indigenous houses in the Marangara region had been covered with tile solely at the initiative of the owners.³⁸

In 2013 Itohan Osayimwese published an article in this journal in which she described a similar hardening of architecture among the Bamum in Cameroon. In it, she argued that the transition of some examples of royal architecture from raffia palm to mud brick, stone, wood, and iron should not be lamented as a mimicry of European building or a loss of native tradition. Rather, it could be seen as an expression of the agency of colonized people to create hybrid forms by taking elements from both their own and foreign cultures and combining them into something new.³⁹ Similarly, the people of Rwanda exhibited a nonmonolithic variety of reactions to colonial programs, ranging from accepting and making choices that actively influenced the programs to rejecting them altogether. In the end, the indigenous people themselves should thus also be recognized as agents in the shift of Rwandan houses from round and organic to rectangular and more durable.

IMIDUGUDU AND A RETURN TO IMPERMANENCE

The colonial housing initiatives were just one of the ways in which the Belgians showed preferential treatment to the Tutsis, sowing discontent among the Hutu majority (around 85 percent of the population).⁴⁰ However, toward the end of the colonial period, the Belgians feared that the trained and educated Tutsis were becoming increasingly anti-colonial, and they abruptly removed the Tutsis and granted positions within the colonial administration to Hutus. And after Rwanda gained independence in 1962, ethnic tensions — based largely on Hutu fears of losing their recent gains in power — periodically erupted in episodes of persecution and violence against the Tutsis.⁴¹ Due to underdevelopment, both unemployment and overcrowding also came to plague the country's urban centers. But there was also hardship in the rural areas, where population growth and the subdivision of land from one generation to the next had reduced the amount of land available to individual families over time.⁴² The dual pressures of growing poverty and increasing land scarcity eventually helped set the stage for catastrophe. And in 1994, the Hutu-led government compelled the genocide of an estimated 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus. The slaughter was only ended by the invasion and victory of the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), largely made up of Tutsi exiles who had been living in Uganda.⁴³

When the RPF emerged victorious in 1994, hundreds of thousands of Tutsi refugees and exiles returned to the

country. But about two million Hutus had by then fled the country, fearing prosecution or retaliation. There was thus initially no need for additional housing, as the returnees could occupy the homes of those who had been killed or had fled. However, in 1995 and 1996 about 1.3 million additional refugees, who had been displaced to Congo and Tanzania by the violence, flooded back into Rwanda.⁴⁴ And two years after the genocide there emerged an urgent new need to create housing in large quantities.

Across the country, there were thousands of damaged homes that could have been repaired and occupied by the returnees.⁴⁵ But rather than allocate funds toward the rehabilitation of these homes, the new Rwandan state decided to push forward with a program that would place people in new homes within planned villages. Rwanda's National Habitat Policy of 1996 thus outlined a strategy to regroup the rural population into *imidugudu*, or planned villages of between one hundred and two hundred houses, where people would be clustered together in new dwellings with more efficient access to services, infrastructure, etc. The policy claimed that the establishment of *imidugudu* would make agricultural production easier, protect the natural environment, foster more nonagricultural employment, and make transportation networks more efficient.⁴⁶ In truth, it was also an attempt to reorganize settlement patterns, prevent further conflict triggered by land scarcity, and ensure that the returning refugees would not flood into Kigali and stress the already stretched ability of the city to absorb new residents. In this way, the *imidugudu* program could be seen as a continuation of the anti-urbanization mindset of the colonial period.

In addition to these concerns, the *imidugudu* program reflected deeper layers of socio-political ambition. For example, the National Habitat Policy claimed as one of its intentions to counter the tendency of dispersed settlement patterns to “*rend difficile la sensibilisation de la population* [make it difficult to sensitize the population],” meaning to convince them of the merits of government policy.⁴⁷ Thus, the state openly admitted that one reason for resettling the population was to obtain better control over it. Specifically, the new level of control would be gained by physically arranging bodies into dwelling patterns where they could be more easily surveilled and propagandized.

Michel Foucault argued that state surveillance will eventually condition a population to manifest what he called “biopower,” a condition in which individuals gradually acquiesce to imposed regulations and enact self-discipline in order to fit within a normalized power structure.⁴⁸ And such an approach to the reconditioning of social norms might indeed be particularly relevant in a nation in need of rebuilding itself after the extreme deterioration in social relations during the genocide. Thus, according to the National Human Resettlement Policy of 2004 (republished in 2009), the resettlement of rural people into *imidugudu* not only intended to provide “adequate housing” and “access to social and economic services,” but to create

“an environment of social integration for different strata of the Rwandan society.”⁴⁹ Reading between the lines (as ethnicities are not mentioned explicitly in this section, nor anywhere in most official state documents), the *imidugudu* might also encourage the Hutu and Tutsi to live together in mixed communities, promoting the reintegration of society.

Recognizing that international assistance for their program would be more readily given if it was seen as serving homeless survivors or former refugees, the Rwandan state also began to couch its language about the *imidugudu* in terms of a “housing crisis,” rather than what it really was — a long-term land use and economic plan.⁵⁰ One irony of portraying the *imidugudu* as a housing solution was that there were, by estimate of the Ministry of Planning, around 84,000 damaged homes already available around the country, and, as mentioned, these homes could have been repaired more quickly and at one-third or less of the cost of building new homes. However, these homes were located outside of the *imidugudu*, and local officials actually put a stop to repair programs once the new policy made it clear that people should be moving to *imidugudu* sites.⁵¹ In 1997 the minister of public works even went so far as to issue an order forbidding anyone from building a house outside an *imidugudu*.⁵²

By the end of 1998 the authorities began to coerce not only homeless returnees and survivors but all Rwandans in rural areas — including those who had never left their existing homes — to move into the *imidugudu*. However, the rate at which proper homes needed to be built in the *imidugudu* far exceeded the capacity of the various aid agencies, and this led to a marked decline in housing quality. Thus the first residents to move into the *imidugudu*, mostly Tutsi survivors or returnees, were provided with move-in ready homes or decent construction materials. But those who came later — many of whom had been obliged to leave solid existing houses — received far less. A Human Rights Watch (HRW) report from 2001 detailed the trajectory of the villagization plan in the first few years after the genocide:

Local authorities permitted ever shoddier houses to be built. As the resources [sic] which had paid salaried workers were exhausted, the new residents — many of them Hutu — received no help and were told to build their own houses. Many lacked the time and resources to build solid, mud-brick homes and they settled instead for wood-and-mud daub structures. The weakest and poorest of the new residents could manage to build only fragile shelters of wood, leaves, and pieces of plastic. Rwandans call such a make-shift shelter a blindé, from the French word meaning tank or armored personnel carrier. The term, which ironically contrasts the fragility of the shelter to the solidity of a military vehicle, apparently refers to the shape of the shelter — something like a small hangar — or to the blue plastic sheeting sometimes used to cover it. Some Rwandans first

*saw the sheeting used to cover military tanks of U.N. peacekeeping troops which arrived in Rwanda in 1994. Some residents of imidugudu have inhabited blindés for two years or more.*⁵³

Life in a *blindé* was wet when it rained, often cold, and cramped. For refugees, these conditions were usually at least no worse than what they had endured in the camps. But for people who had left a good, solid home, it must have seemed completely illogical. Moreover, according to data gathered by the United Nations Development Program and the Rwandan government, more than half a million people were still living in *blindé* shelters or unfinished houses five years after the genocide (FIG. 12).

Various forms of coercion were also necessary to “convince” people to move. One was the destruction of existing homes, and this was sometimes carried out by the police under the orders of local officials. However, in some areas, homeowners were forced to *destroy their own homes* before they moved to *imidugudu*, where they used the remnants of their former home, augmented by pieces of plastic, sticks, and even grass, to construct makeshift *blindés*.⁵⁴ It is ironic that after decades of colonial programs to get people out of thatched dwellings, they were once again using grass. As one interviewee told HRW:

*Those with houses in durable materials [baked or adobe bricks], we had to destroy them by force. [. . .] Imagine destroying a home made of brick with a metal roof, then looking for grass to build a new one! I can't even call my house a hut, not even a blindé, because blindés have plastic sheeting for roofs. I had a nice house made of stone, with glass windows. But I have destroyed that house. That is the way it is. We have to obey government orders.*⁵⁵



FIGURE 12. This simple shelter is covered by a plastic roof, like many unfinished houses that rural Rwandans occupied when they were displaced into the planned settlements called *imidugudu*. Photo by Suzi McGregor, 2009.

People tried to salvage what they could from their homes, particularly if they had a metal roof that could help keep out the rain.⁵⁶ Indeed, the more they could take from their old houses, the better off they would be in the *imidugudu*. Unfortunately, metal roofing was hard to salvage because the nail holes were difficult to repair and they allowed water leaks.⁵⁷

One might expect that such a degree of imposed change would have been met with more resistance from the local population; however, the state utilized fear as a psychological tool for persuasion. In particular, the authorities were known to exploit fear of attack by *interahamwe*, the militias that had carried out many of the genocide massacres, to persuade reluctant residents to relocate to the *imidugudu*.⁵⁸ Memories of the past were thus employed to enforce the policy of the present, in order to reshape society in the future image envisioned by the state. It was a clear example of the state using acts of creative destruction clear the way for a new organization of society. Literal destruction, in the form of demolition or forced abandonment of homes, was thus inflicted to support the creation of the new planned villages. It was a Faustian kind of creative destruction, in which great authority was used to control the masses in the service of lofty ambitions. And unlike the colonial housing programs, the *imidugudu* policy profoundly altered the rural landscape of Rwanda, as almost 20 percent of the population live in *imidugudu*.⁵⁹ In some districts, the proportion of people in *imidugudu* is as high as 90 percent.⁶⁰ Around the country there are now numerous clusters of tiny houses, all similar in size, shape, and materials (FIGS. 13, 14).⁶¹

The state has since recognized that many of the homes built in the *imidugudu* were inadequate. The National Human Settlement Policy, issued in 2009, thus referred several times to the “flimsy structures” occupied by the poorest families.⁶² It acknowledged that the most vulnerable families live under “plastic sheetings” or “in makeshift shelters commonly called “*blindés*.”⁶³ And it went on to specify the problems: “The materials and the techniques used, the quality of finishing, the surface area of the houses reflect their poor quality.”⁶⁴ The policy further blamed a number of factors for the deficiencies, including lack of funding (particularly a drop-off in funds from foreign donors and NGOs), limited human resources, and insufficient building materials. Yet, rather than alter the program, the policy recommended a recommitment to it through such means as strengthening existing administrative structures, studying locally produced building materials, and raising “awareness” among both the general population and the authorities as to the importance of the program.⁶⁵

THE BYE BYE NYAKATSI PROGRAM

While the *imidugudu* program had a far-reaching effect, significant numbers of people still resided in traditional-style dwellings in 2009 when influential members of the Rwandan

diaspora visited a rural village and saw the kind of thatched-roof huts they had either left behind long ago or never lived in themselves. The diaspora members were in Rwanda for the 4th Diaspora Global Convention (December 13–15, 2009), which was hosted by the Diaspora General Directorate, a division of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation.

Created by multiple waves of large-scale exodus over decades of persecution, the Rwanda diaspora is an important and sizable group with ongoing influence in national affairs. And at diaspora conventions, such people travel back to their motherland to find out how they can assist in the sectors of health, education and culture. In 2009 they visited the southeastern province of Bugesera, where they observed people living in *nyakatsi*, or thatched houses. In a short video documentary, Dr. Ismail Buchanon, then the executive director of the Rwanda Diaspora Global Network (RDGN), explained:

*We could tell from the first sight that they were not happy with their lives. So as the Rwandan Diaspora, we asked ourselves the question, “What can we do to help our fellow countrymen living in such hard conditions?” Not conditions that they created but those caused by our past. . . . So we thought about this project called “Bye Bye Nyakatsi” so we can get rid of those houses made from leaves. We also did this so we can fall in line with the government’s policy and vision because, as you know, our government aims at getting rid of leave houses by 2010.*⁶⁶

Shortly afterwards, the RDGN, in partnership with the government and the Bralirwa beverage company, initiated the Bye Bye Nyakatsi campaign.⁶⁷ Robert Masozera, the general director of RDGN, stated that the Rwandan diaspora “saw at firsthand how those houses are similar to bird nests.”⁶⁸ In fact, a common tagline for the campaign was “Nests are for birds, not people.” Masozera explained how a small *nyakatsi* would shelter a family of five or six and their domestic animals without proper sanitation or access to clean water, and he asserted that as a result of the campaign to replace these houses with better houses, “certainly, this will be a modern community.”⁶⁹ Statements such as these reveal the deliberate construction of an opposition between the modern (corrugated metal) and the traditional (thatch).

Another agent may this be added to the list of those who have shaped housing in Rwanda: the diaspora. This time, the impact has been both external and internal. Because many diaspora members have been exposed to houses in other parts of the world, they have adopted a more globalized or Western concept of house form and materials. At the same time, they identify as Rwandan (see “our fellow countrymen” in the above quote), and thus they have a sense of pride in claiming Rwanda as “modern.”

Both the RDGN and the Rwandan state now promote the Bye Bye Nyakatsi campaign as an initiative to provide people

FIGURE 13. A relatively good quality house in one of the post-genocide government-planned villages. Photo by Roel Sloomweg, 2016.



FIGURE 14. One of the post-genocide government-planned villages, showing similarity of the houses. Photo by Roel Sloomweg, 2016.



with more modern houses. The Rwandan government cites a number of valid health and safety concerns — such as mildew and the potential hazard of fire — as justifications for the campaign to eradicate traditional thatched roofing.⁷⁰ And it is true that metal is more durable and easier to put up than thatch. But the new metal roofs are not without their own set of problems. To begin, they are not thermally insulated, and although Rwanda has a relatively mild climate, there can be plenty of warm days (especially in the flatter east) and cool nights (especially in the mountainous west) when the temperatures inside the home would have been better moderated by the thick thatch roof. In addition, the sound of rain on a metal roof can be deafening in the rainy season. However, the campaign is as much about the aspiration for the country to have a particular image as it is about actual materials or dwelling conditions. Metal is mass manufactured, and thus a symbol of industrialism; and it is shiny (at first), and thus a symbol of newness. Metal is also the one major element of many rural vernacular houses that cannot be made by hand. Moreover, metal certainly does not look like a bird's nest. The Bye Bye Nyakatsi campaign has thus created an important visual signifier of Rwanda's pursuit of modernity: the gleam of shiny roofs against green hills.

Unfortunately, the program is not without controversy. Most notably, it was implemented jointly by the Ministry of

Local Government, the Rwanda Defense Forces (RDF), and the Rwanda National Police (RNP).⁷¹ The inclusion of military and police forces suggests that, once again, the transition out of traditional homes is not always peaceful or voluntary. Indeed, in 2011 the governor of the southern province, Fidel Ndayisaba, spoke of demolition as an effective means to propel the Bye Bye Nyakatsi program forward. Addressing a press conference, Ndayisaba said that people may ignore or refuse a directive when they are not pushed to comply with it. And he suggested that people were still living in thatched houses not because of a lack of means, but because they did not value living in a habitation better suited to human needs. According to Ndayisaba:

People were seemingly happy to stay in their thatched houses and showed no commitment to leave them. But when such houses are demolished, people who have means are encouraged to look for appropriate accommodation in a short period of time while those who have no means are identified and get help. It is really a good strategy of accelerating the anti-Nyakatsi drive because when people are temporarily accommodated by their neighbours or paying for rent, they quickly build their own houses.⁷²

The 2010 Terms of Reference for the Bye-Bye Nyakatsi program further include such objectives as “improve community policing and Civil Military Cooperation,” and “support all the people living in ‘Nyakatsi’ to settle in identified sites of Imidugudu.”⁷³ Thus it becomes clear how the *nyakatsi* eradication program is in fact explicitly tied to the *imidugudu* resettlement program. Whereas the *imidugudu* houses had often been inadequate, the government is now at least promising to provide a metal roof for each dwelling. Echoing the colonial agenda for durable materials to fix subjects to the land, however, the Bye Bye Nyakatsi program is also seeking to create more robust dwellings to entrench people in a particular site. But this time, it will be according to new, state-planned settlement patterns.

Since the Bye Bye Nyakatsi initiative was launched in 2010, thatched roofing has been nearly eradicated from the landscape. Most people still live in houses made of mud block or wattle-and-daub, but they now have corrugated metal roofs instead of thatch.⁷⁴ The green hillsides of Rwanda thus glitter with shiny metal roofs, a striking sight in the bright equatorial sunlight.

In his chapter about Goethe’s fictional character Faust in the seminal book *All That Is Solid Melts into Air*, Marshall Berman identified a key feature of Faustian development in underdeveloped countries: it often involves gratuitous destruction to make the symbolic point that society cannot turn back.⁷⁵ In the case of Rwanda it may not be gratuitous, but in some ways the largest impact of the Bye Bye Nyakatsi campaign may indeed be its visual and *symbolic* declaration of modernity. This visual evidence of progress — presented in the form of newspaper photographs, foreign donor reports, and village tours for visitors — serves to legitimize state control over the population by testifying that Rwanda is moving on from its difficult past and marching forward to the future.

TRANSFORMATION OF THE “TRADITIONAL”

Under the guidance of the Kigali City Master Plan, informal settlements in the capital are currently at perpetual risk of demolition. Houses that are slated to be demolished are marked with a red X, and entire neighborhoods can disappear in very little time (FIG. 15).⁷⁶ The poor never entirely go away but they are moved around, and out of sight. Thus, precariousness is a part of life for many urban Rwandans. But while traditional ways of building allowed for more flexibility, it has become harder now to pick up, move, and build again. Yet there is a disconnect between the kinds of durable homes people have been conditioned to desire, and the reality that so many people lack solid claims to a plot.

The irony is that thatched roofing remains common in Rwanda today — but not on houses, unless they are traditional dwellings re-created in museums. Although the Bye Bye Nyakatsi campaign has basically eradicated thatch from vernacular dwellings, one can still find thatched roofs at many



FIGURE 15. Demolition of an informal neighborhood in Kigali, Rwanda. Photo by author, 2017.

different places around the country. They exist inside of museums such as the Ethnographic Museum (FIG. 16). And they exist on the gazebos and poolside huts at restaurants and hotels like the Mille Collines (also known as the hotel from the 2004 film *Hotel Rwanda*), and on the cabins and communal buildings of lakeside resorts such as Rwiza Village on Lake Kivu (FIG. 17).

In such places, the use of thatch may appeal to foreign tourists who want to experience something “traditional” and “African.” In essence, thatch has become touristic scenography in spaces of foreign leisure, representing the “authentic” Rwandan environment — precisely to moderate the universality of a modernist hotel environment. Thus the “traditional” increasingly becomes a construct based on contemporary economic interests which cater, frequently, to the expectations of foreign audiences.

Meanwhile, the notion of modernity in Rwandan dwelling has come to be associated with durable materials and orthogonal forms. It is important, however, to recognize that these changes were not entirely top-down, nor external to internal. “Modernity” in Rwandan dwelling has been defined by multiple agents.

In colonized settings like Rwanda, the modern was initially defined by colonizers in order to differentiate and inferiorize the “traditional” and legitimate the control of a ruling power. But increasing connectivity, accessibility, and the monetization of Rwandan society have also exposed the masses to an increased variety of options. Notions of the modern have thus also been shaped by choice on the part of the indigenous population. The Rwandan diaspora, a population that can be classified as both external and internal, has also helped to define the modern based on its experience with other cultures. All these agents have played a decisive role in the story of how houses in Rwanda have changed over time in both material and form.

FIGURE 16. The re-creation of a traditional thatched hut inside the Ethnographic Museum of Rwanda. Photo by Antoine Torrens, 2004 (Wikimedia Commons).



FIGURE 17. Resort on the shores of Lake Kivu where visitors can stay in cabanas with thatched roofs. Photo by author, 2016.



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