

Indigenous Practice, Power and Social Control: The Paradox of the Practice of *Umuganda* in Rwanda

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Abstract

Most of the recent research on Rwanda has concentrated on reconciliation, recovery and economic development following the genocide of 1994. This paper focuses on the practice of community work, known as *umuganda* in the local language, Kinyarwanda. The paper examines how its early traditional social practice has been transformed from an emphasis on social well-being to being used for state building and infrastructure advancement. Based on interviews and focus group discussions, and supported by theories on community development and participation, the paper is able to identify extensive power and control by the state over community work in Rwanda.

Keywords: *Umuganda*, sustainable development, traditional practice, local government

Introduction

In principle, Rwanda cherishes its indigenous traditions, especially those relating to developmental practice. Among them is the practice of ‘community work’ known as *umuganda* in Kinyarwanda, the local language spoken throughout Rwanda. Therefore the term *umuganda* will be used throughout this study, instead of ‘community work’ or ‘indigenous practice’. *Umuganda* is a traditional practice dating back in the pre-colonial period, which was manipulated later on and used to strengthen and exercise power and control over ordinary people (Mukarubuga 2006: 7).

Currently, *umuganda* is compulsory for everyone and is generally undertaken on the last Saturday of every month. *Umuganda*, in general, is currently used as a platform to implement governmental programmes, such as those of decentralisation and economic development plans. Its practice is considered to be a significant element in the government's poverty eradication plans as well as in promoting unity and reconciliation in a society that has been devastated by conflict, genocide and poverty. Nevertheless, these aspects of *umuganda* have hardly been investigated. Few scholars have written on *umuganda*, and have looked at it as an ideology which was used to divide Rwandans after independence and then continued to genocide in 1994. Consequently, the very idea of *umuganda* became distasteful to many, which is probably why ordinary Rwandans alike have tended to avoid the topic.

The task of this paper is to analyse indigenous practice of *umuganda*, to show how it has been transformed. How a community owned and controlled practice turned into a form of state control? What impact has this had on Rwandans? The paper addresses these questions by drawing on fieldwork which was conducted in two communities in Rwanda, one in urban Kigali and the other in rural, Western Province. Based on interviews and focus group discussions¹ in 2010, supported by the community development and participation theories, the analysis reveals extensive power and control by the state over community work in Rwanda. The argument falls into three sections. The first one presents an overview of the practice of *umuganda* from pre-colonial period up to and including the genocide. The second section concentrates on the practice of *umuganda* after genocide, while the third section investigates the impact of state control over the practice of *umuganda*.

¹ Three groups of respondents were selected. One group of interviewees was a group of sixteen elders found in both Kigali and Western Province.

A second group of interviews was with thirteen government officials at all levels in the Ministry of Local Administration, Good Governance, Community Development and Social Affairs.

The third group of interviewees was a group of thirty ordinary people from the same villages and cells, who did not participate in the focus groups. These respondents were chosen using random sampling.

1. An Overview of the Practice of *Umuganda*

In pre-colonial Rwanda, *umuganda* was a traditional practice and cultural value of working together to solve social and economic problems for mutual benefit. Notably, this practice was extended to those who were very poor or incapacitated to take part in collective action. The activities of *umuganda* as traditionally practised included, for instance, farming for those who were unable to do so due to either physical handicap or old age, building houses for the poor and providing transportation to medical facilities to those who were in need (Mukarubuga 2006: 20). A group of households used to come together to share the burden of the work, making sure that everyone in the community had shelter and had their farms ready in time for the planting season (2006: 21). This played a significant role in protecting human security and increasing household income.

Traditionally, *umuganda* was informed by the understanding that individual belonging and the well-being of society were central to its practice. The concept is related to the idea of solidarity and a communal sense of living, which can in turn be related to the South African philosophy of *ubuntu*. A translation from the Nguni proverb ‘*Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*’ (often translated as ‘a person is a person through other persons’ (Gade 2011: 303). The spirit of *umuganda* may also be interpreted as: ‘if a neighbour is hungry I am also hungry, if s/he is homeless I am homeless’. It is an idea that emphasises the essence of human togetherness (Interview: Kigali 22 December 2011). Interviewees thought that this understanding drove Banyarwanda in the early days to join efforts to identify and solve their neighbour’s problems whenever required (Interview: 14 December 2010). Until the arrival of missionaries, toward the end of the 1880s, *umuganda* grew from being a household and community initiative to one that incorporated the entire system under the kingdom’s administration.

This practice continued even during the colonial period. However, with the arrival of missionaries and colonialism, the mutual relationship became highly exploitative and the term used was not *umuganda* but *uburetwa* (forced labour). The policy of forced labour was adopted officially by the colonial administration in the 1940s (IRDP 2005). Thereafter every family had to provide compulsory communal work for 60 days of the year. This was divided into several blocks of twelve days per month and was meant for the construction of roads and schools, working in coffee and tea plantations and in the mines in the Congo (IRDP 2005). According to

Lemarchand (1970: 22) under the Belgian administration, *uburetwa* was determined by the local chiefs to require two or even three days labour out of six. This meant that people had little time to work for their own survival. Pottier (2002: 9) notes that *uburetwa* undermined the security of the majority and made survival more difficult.

Indigenous people who depended on each other for cultivation, for example, had little time for their survival, as a result of less food production. Given this experience, people were obliged by colonial masters to cultivate food and finally the obligations extended to afforestation and fighting soil-erosion (IRDP 2005: 27). Failure to complete cultivation on time resulted in punishment, usually corporal punishment². The punishment was both very painful and shameful and was dreaded by all Rwandans, as the victim had to undress in public and be flogged naked (Mukarubuga 2006: 5). Those who were taken to work in mines in the Congo and on coffee and tea plantations were uprooted from their families and lived in labour camps.

After independence from Belgium, the traditional practice of *umuganda* turned into a political philosophy. While there is no record found on the practice of *umuganda* in the first republic, between 1962 and the 1973, it is well documented that the policy of *umuganda* was formally launched by President Habyarimana in February 1974 (Mamdani 2001: 146), and it was often explained in the literature as co-operative communal labour (2001:146). Driven by the regime's developmental ideology, the policy aimed to boost the development and the economy of the country. In similar fashion to the colonial era, coffee and tea continued to be cash crops and people were required to work in the plantations (Des Forges 1999: 57-58).

Verwimp (2005: 320) explains how the post-colonial government declared the purpose of *umuganda* as beneficial for economic development and in providing state services to the community. Nevertheless, Verwimp (2005: 321) notes that *umuganda* really served the elite's economic and political interests, by fulfilling their political goals and garnering greater political power for them, rather than attending to the needs of the entire population.

Although in the early 1960s and 1970s *umuganda* included building schools, repairing roads, constructing bridges, digging anti-erosion ditches

² Corporal punishment consisted of 8 strokes of *ikiboko*: 'a long cylindrical piece of dried hippopotamus hide' (see Mukarubuga 2006).

and other state projects, people were consistently taught about citizenship (Straus 2006: 23). People were always reminded of their heritage as cultivators, that they should be proud of it and show this by using their skills. According to Lemarchand (1970: 94-95), this practice grew from the type of social hierarchy of *ubukonde*, a traditional lineage based on land ownership and their patron-client relations³.

Although the post-colonial regime claimed to introduce *umuganda* as a traditional practice, it actually retained many aspects of the Belgian colonial model (Schaefer 2001). For example, the government emphasized the colonial concept of Rwandan identity. The practice of *umuganda* made efforts to distinguish 'indigenous' ba-Hutu from 'non indigenous' ba-Tutsi (Mamdani 2001: 193-194). '*Umuganda* in the post-colonial period is best understood in the context of the mythical peasant, with the ideology that only the Hutus were the real peasants of Rwanda' (Verwimp 2000: 326). This ideology also explained who was a true munya-Rwandan, which was in turn used against the Tutsi, who were not known as cultivators but aliens pastoralist (Verwimp 2000: 343). Hatred that led to divisions was increasingly planted under the stream of development during *umuganda*.

Umuganda then turned into a means of promoting oppression and exclusion among Rwandans. This was done through colonial legacy of ethnic construction. For instance, in 1994 the idea of *umuganda* was used and served as a means of mass mobilisation during the genocide, where more than one million people are recorded to have been killed within three months. Those in power argued then that only one particular group of people, the Hutus, had the right to exist, and other groups, Tutsis, were targeted for extermination in the name of *umuganda* (Verwimp 2004: 328-329). In period leading to genocide, the traditional practice of *umuganda* was emphasized as a way of giving voice and recognition to the Hutu majority (Verwimp 2003: 12).

Mamdani (2001: 145) examines the organisation and practice of *umuganda* during this time and explains that the practice was directed at political ends rather than community development and thus excluded the participation of the population in the management process of their affairs (Ministry of Local Government and Social Affairs 2001: 7). *Umuganda* then

³ With the coming of Europeans, a genuine identity eventually developed between the *ubukonde* cultivation system and *umuheto*, the cattle system (Lemarchand 1970: 95).

fell into the category of manipulative participation. Within this particular context, participation signifies involvement of the people only in terms of their contributing labour and resources as well as making a firm commitment to the state's political ideology (Hall 1986: 97). According to Hall, this kind of participation has little to do with freedom of decision-making or the encouragement of independent initiatives by autonomous groups (1986: 97). 'Local politicians and administrators were the ones responsible for the organisation of the weekly *umuganda*, which gave the officials great discretionary power to decide who did and who did not have to participate' (Verwimp 2000: 349).

Verwimp (2000: 345) argues that the question of whether or not *umuganda* helped in the development of the country depends to a large extent on the definition of development one is using:

In order to understand the actions of dictatorial regimes, one should not only look at their 'developmental' outcomes but also at the intentions of the regime. What particular kind of development did they want to achieve for their country? In order to discover the intentions of the regime, 'development' in Rwanda is studied as an ideology with particular emphasis on agriculture and on the restrictions of movement imposed by the regime (2000: 325-361).

According to Verwimp (2000:346-347), 'when dictatorial political power is legitimized with a peasant ideology, genocide becomes a political option because a peasant society does not tolerate the existence of non-peasants, in the same way as a communist society does not tolerate the existence of a capitalist class'. Although the colonial image of the Tutsi has been that of a noble aristocracy, the post-genocide had changed that to one of laziness, those who could not cultivate (Hitjens 1999: 255).

In the early 1990s, government propaganda gave no choice to Rwandans other than to attend *umuganda* for political mobilisation. Those who could not attend were regarded as enemies of the country who ran the risk of being brutalised and killed (Thomson 2009: 119). The situation became yet more tense when a group of Rwandans who were in exile invaded Rwanda from Uganda, on 1st September 1990. This attack provided the perfect pretext for President Habyarimana to propagate the idea that Tutsis were preparing to 'enslave' Hutus again (Chrétien 2000: 331). The ideology

was not new to Rwandans. They had known it since the late 1920s when an ethnic identity card was introduced and were reminded of this during the performance of weekly *umuganda* under post-colonial government (see Pottier 1996; Chetien 2000; Mamdani 2001). The government then sponsored the creation of youth militias, known as *Interahamwe* (meaning, those who act together) to counter the threat. The increasingly tense climate in the country was reflected in the political arena, and from 1990 to early 1994 negotiation was unsuccessful (2000: 332).

On the night of April 6, 1994, a plane returning President Habyarimana from signing a peace agreement in Da-es-Salaam was shot down at Kigali airport. In this atmosphere, patrols and barriers were set up immediately. An order from the government was given to all Hutu and *interahamwe* through a National Radio broadcast, to kill all Tutsi, men, women and children. According to the actual meaning of '*interahamwe*', the killings were instructed to be done in the form of 'acting together as communal work' (Chrétien 2000: 332). The actual killing started on 7 April 1994 (Chrétien 2000: 332). More than one million Tutsi and a few moderate Hutu are estimated to have been killed, in less than three months (Thomson 2009: 119).

Examining the reasons why perpetrators committed genocide, Straus (2006: 109) found that 88% took part in weekly *umuganda*. Strauss is not suggesting that participating in *umuganda* by definition predisposed people to commit genocide, but the finding indicates that with *umuganda* the state had mobilized a significant proportion of perpetrators before the genocide (2006: 110). Learning from the peasant ideology (only Hutus are peasants and children of the soil) and the everyday propaganda during *umuganda* had also motivated people to see their fellow ba-Tutsi as enemies. Thus, Hintjens (1999: 245) argues that the bonds in civil society were completely broken.

People were told by government officials that participating in the attacks was their requirement for *umuganda* (1999: 89). Administrators were responsible for informing their superiors about all important developments within their jurisdictions (Des Forges 1999: 233). Under the pretext of the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) invasion from exile⁴, the government

⁴ The majority of those in the RPF were the Tutsi diaspora who fled the country in the 1959.

distributed guns to every tenth household (Pottier 2002: 135). The term, ‘to work’, referred to killing; most of the local leaders told their people that their welfare depended on killing. They were told to come with every possible tool to work with (tools that are used for *umuganda*), including machetes, and hoes (Diamond 2005: 313).

During the genocide, *umuganda* did not involve planting trees but ‘clearing out the weeds’ – a phrase used by the *genocidaires* to mean the killing of Tutsis. Chopping up men was referred to as ‘bush clearing’ and slaughtering women and children as ‘pulling out the roots of the bad weeds’ (Prunier 1995: 138-142; Mamdani 2001: 194). The slogan, ‘clearing bushes and removing bad weeds’, were familiar terms used in the course of ordinary agricultural labour undertaken in *umuganda*. Moreover, Des Forges argues that authorities summoned people for *umuganda* which consisted of stuffing bodies down latrines, tossing them in pits, throwing them into rivers or lakes or digging mass graves in which to bury them (Des Forges 1999: 241).

The meaning of collective action and togetherness then lost its original positive sense in Rwanda. Despite these changes and distasteful experiences, *umuganda* has remained a type of collective action which is at the centre of government policy and practice (Ministry of Local Governance, 2001: 9-10). After all these experiences what was the reason for the post-genocide government to re-establish *umuganda*? What does the population think of participating in an indigenous practice that has been violated by political interests? What mostly motivates them to participate in *umuganda* today? In the emerging of global economic growth knowledge, how does the practice of *umuganda* contribute to local people’s social economic growth? The accounts of participants in this study contribute to respond these questions. We begin by investigating how *umuganda* has been practised after the genocide of 1994.

2. The Practice of *Umuganda* in Rwanda after the Genocide

Locating *umuganda* at the centre of community development policy, the current government reasons that the policy is drawn from the traditions, rules and norms of how Rwandans relate to one another. The government’s community development policy aims at empowering the Rwandan community by involving them in the decision-making process. Therefore the

policy and practice of *umuganda* are considered a means of expression to encourage good governance, while implementing community development and other government policies such as that of decentralisation. Moreover, *umuganda* is seen as an important policy in the process of unity and reconciliation (Republic of Rwanda, Ministry of Local Government 2008).

After the genocide, Rwanda faced many challenges, ranging from human security to infrastructure and a lack of public and private sector professionals. Political leaders believed that returning to their traditional norms and values could help solve socio-economic problems. *Umuganda* was then re-established in 2001 by the government through the Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning (MINECOFIN) and institutionalised as a government policy, Law No. 53/2007, in 2008, under the administration of the Ministry of Local Government, Good Governance, Community Development and Social Affairs (MINALOC).

With so much to do, especially regarding poverty reduction and the reconciliation process, the government of Rwanda has emphasised *umuganda* as a common development and national rebuilding strategy. *Umuganda* falls into a more general policy framework of community development, which was designed by drawing on the tradition, rules, and norms of how Rwandans relate to one another in order to promote good governance and the rebuilding of Rwandan society (Straus 2006: 109; MINALOC - Procedures Manual for Local Government in Rwanda 2007). *Umuganda* is carried out once a month countrywide and involves the participation of all, including the president and other government officials (*The New Times* 2006).

The literature on community development emphasizes the empowerment of people at the grassroots level, social mobilization and bottom-up planning processes, especially in efforts to improve the quality of life of the poor (Swanepoel 1992: 17). Although in theory, the policy of *umuganda* offers room for dialogue between the local authority and communities, some have found little interaction in practice, with the government mostly issuing top-down directives (Mukarubuga 2006: 21). Scholars like Brinkerhoff and Crosby (2002: 6) have already noted that designing a policy is relatively easy but managing their implementation is always challenging. This problem can be seen in how the policy of *umuganda* is being implemented. Good intentions for the policy of *umuganda* may have been adopted but good management and implementation are central to its success.

2.1 The Main Reason for Establishing *Umuganda* as a State Policy

Results from Kigali and Western Province, presented in Table 1, indicate the reasons respondents gave for why *umuganda* is practised nowadays.

Table 1: The main reason for establishing *umuganda*

Location		Post-genocide	
		n	%
Kigali	Main reason for establishing <i>umuganda</i>	76	100
	Cheap labour force	9	12
	To train the population for Self-solving problems	26	34
	Maintain unity	8	11
	To create a channel of communication	31	41
	Other responses	2	3
Western Province		n	%
	Main reason for establishing <i>umuganda</i>	63	100
	To obtain a cheap labour force	16	25
	To train the population for self- solving problems ⁵	17	27
	To maintain unity of the population	9	14
	To create a channel of communication	20	32
	Other responses	1	2

Respondents stated that after the genocide the reason for establishing *umuganda* is to create a channel for communication (41% in Kigali, 32% in Western Province). One of the respondents explained that:

⁵ During the meeting after *umuganda*, local people are encouraged to form and join group associations that will facilitate in reducing any social and economic challenges.

The reason for establishing *umuganda* is for the government to implement their plans easily through citizens because that is how they can control and make a follow-up of what they have told them to do (interview: Ordinary Community Member 2-a 17 Dec 2010).

An *umudugudu* leader (village leader⁶) in Western Province shared his view on the reason for establishing *umuganda* in the post-colonial and post-genocide periods. He pointed out that ‘the main reason is to get to the people easily because *umuganda* helps to mobilise people to make them understand and implement government’s plans’ (interview: Local Leader-2b 24 Dec 2010). Although he condemned this, the local leader explains this phenomenon by giving an example of the post-colonial government’s achievement in using *umuganda* to divide the people and to bring about the genocide in 1994 (interview: Local Leader-2b 24 Dec 2010). What is seen here is the state using citizens to serve its purpose as well as requiring citizens to meet their obligations to the state. This raises issues about the implications for state-society relations, community development, and the continuity of social practices; for example, how does the community relate to the policy and practice of *umuganda*?

Moreover, 34% in Kigali and 27% in Western Province responded that the reason for pursuing *umuganda* in the post-genocide era is to train people to solve problems for themselves, such as encouraging them to form or join small income generation groups. While 12% participants in Kigali and 25% in Western Province believed that the reason for establishing *umuganda* is to obtain cheap labour, 11% in Kigali and in Western Province 14% thought that the main reason is to maintain unity of the population. A few other responses in Western Province indicated that the aim of *umuganda* is to control people.

It is, however, noted that twice as many in Western Province (25% compared to 12%) in Kigali viewed *umuganda* as a source of cheap labour. This is perhaps due to the overwhelming days of *umuganda* (weekly and sometimes twice a week) and activities involved. This is different from Kigali where *umuganda* is done by many once a month, and possibly where it is easier to avoid *umuganda* in the city than in the rural areas. Nevertheless, the

⁶ Village leaders are not traditional leaders rather, local government leaders under decentralization policy.

majority response both Kigali and Western Province were of the view that *umuganda* is primarily a means of communication.

2.2 General Understanding of *Umuganda*

Those in Kigali thought that in the post-genocide period *umuganda* is voluntary and beneficial public work (46%), whereas 43% regard it as forced but beneficial (see Table 2.) This beneficial version of *umuganda* is to be distinguished from the colonially-imposed forced labour where the state diverted *umuganda* to obtain labour on plantations. Although the current practice of *umuganda* is certainly different from that of the colonial period, an elder from Western Province did not see much difference. He noted:

They [Rwandans] asked for independence but they did not know what they were doing because if you look closely, you find that colonial masters have gone nowhere. They have chased them but they have not gone. They have left every single side of their mind and behaviour. I mean in the early days, *umuganda* was for the community self-solving its problems but now it is for solving political problems (EL 9-b 22 Dec 2010).

The current practice of *umuganda* does not compel people to work on tea or coffee plantations but they are, in effect, ‘forced’, for example, to build additional classrooms and to build and maintain roads.

Table 2: How the population understands *umuganda*

Location		Post-genocide	
		n	%
Kigali	How the population understand <i>umuganda</i>	76	100
	A forced and non-beneficial labour	4	5
	A forced but beneficial public work	33	43
	A voluntary and beneficial public work	35	46
	A tool of oppression by leaders	1	1
	Other	3	4

		n	%
Western Province	How the population understand <i>umuganda</i>	63	100
	A forced and non-beneficial labour	7	11
	A forced but beneficial public work	35	56
	A voluntary and beneficial public work	18	29
	A tool of oppression by leaders	3	5
	Other	0	0

The population currently attend *umuganda* because they are forced to.

For example, if you take five people from one family and ask them to attend *umuganda*, it is forced because the household has their own way of sharing responsibility if they have the power. It is also found to be a feasible way for government to communicate to citizens, either for the sake of informing them or to enforce them to do something (Interview: Kigali 23 02 Jan 2011).

This was explained by one respondent who said that in the *umuganda* gathering, ‘we can’t address to the people what is not on the program (*kurigahunda*), we speak according to the theme that the government has sent to us’ (Interview: Western Province, 01 Jan 2011).

Participants felt that *umuganda* has become a project for nation building instead of community building. Nonetheless, one respondent from the elders association⁷ did not think that it is beneficial for national building either. He explained:

Currently, *umuganda* is more a socialising event than working. I always see people putting their hands in their pockets from the beginning to the end of *umuganda*. How can more than thirty people spend three hours in one place and not see any tangible work? You can see that people are not ready for *umuganda* because many come

⁷ Elders refer to their association as *intekoizilikana*, with has the aim of preserving Rwandan culture.

with no tools to use for *umuganda*. I see others coming in white tracksuits as if you are going for sports or a meeting! (Interviews: Kigali 15 Dec 2010).

From this observation, the very presence of people seems to be more meaningful and important than actual work. Some come so as to avoid being accused of avoiding *umuganda* which might be interpreted as being anti-government.

Although not joining others for *umuganda* was not illegal in the early days, it was regarded by the community members as self-isolation from the rest of the community, which could result in not receiving any assistance from neighbours when needed. But from the colonial period onward *umuganda* has been required by law and not participating is still regarded as a crime. According to the present policy of *umuganda*, a person who does not carry out *umuganda* can be fined FRW. 5000 (almost \$10). Currently, people are required to have an attendance card which has to be signed every time *umuganda* is performed. Cards are organised by the government and people are required to buy them for FRW.100. This card also has to be presented whenever the bearer needs services from local government.

2.3 Why People Participate in *Umuganda*

According to Table 3, after the genocide people are motivated to participate in *umuganda* for various reasons: mutual help; meeting friends; neighbours and socialising; pleasing leaders; getting information about the government's plans; and because of the fear of punishment or prosecution (39% in Kigali and 32% in Western Province). Another 24% from Kigali indicated that obtaining information about government's plans is their main motivation. By contrast, 21% from Western Province were concerned about being fined or prosecuted, whereas 19% suggested that they attend *umuganda* just to get information about the government's plans. 11% in Kigali and 16% in Western Province attended *umuganda* in order to meet friends, neighbours and socialise. One of the respondents explained:

I go to *umuganda* to meet people, to get to know new people in my community and to make myself known in the neighbourhood (Interview: Kigali 01 Jan 2011).

Interestingly, among the 2% from Western Province who participated in *umuganda* for different reasons altogether, they said that they are motivated by a feeling of ownership and mutual help. More generally, what emerged was that, ‘currently the feeling of ownership and mutual help was what drove most pre-colonial *umuganda* practices but ownership has given way to insecurity, sociality, and the need for belonging’ (Interview: Kigali 16 Dec 2011).

Table 3: Motivation to participate in *umuganda*

Location		Post-genocide	
		N	%
Kigali	Motivation to participate in <i>umuganda</i>	76	100
	Mutual help	9	12
	Meet friends, neighbours and socialize	8	11
	Please leaders	1	1
	Get information about government's plans	18	24
	Fear of fine or prosecution	9	12
	All the above assertions are valid	30	39
	Other	0	0
Western Province	Motivations to participate in <i>umuganda</i>	63	100
	Mutual help	5	8
	Meet friends, neighbour and socialise with	10	16
	Please leaders	2	3
	Get information about government's plans	12	19
	Fear of fine or prosecution	13	21
	All the above assertions are valid	20	32
	Other	1	2

As already identified, from the post-colonial period until the present, *umuganda* was used as an avenue for government to communicate with the people. *Umuganda* provided an assembly-point that government functionaries

used and still use to communicate its policies, programs, decrees and demands. People were and are still being forced to attend *umuganda*.

We have seen that everyone is required to buy an attendance card that people have to keep on themselves, and have it signed as proof of attendance. It was also learned that some people attend *umuganda* merely to have their card signed so as to avoid problems when needing any government service. Moreover, serious complaints of prejudice were heard since, apparently, some people are asked to present their *umuganda* card and others are not. A young lady wanting to apply to register her *mariage civile*⁸, discovered that the executive secretary at the sector office required her first to produce her *umuganda* card in order to see whether she has performed *umuganda*. Someone else who happened to be present commented,

this is not fair, why didn't he [executive] ask the other person for a card? *Mhuuu!* These people look at you, and they know how to respond to your request depending on how you appear to them. It is not every one that they ask to present *umuganda* card (interview: 15 Dec 2010).

There are various opinions in relation to the punishment that is given to those who do not participate in *umuganda*. While both participants in Kigali (58%) and Western Province (41%) thought that people are fined, 25% in Kigali and 40% in Western Province reported that there is no punishment for those who do not attend. Even though the current policy of *umuganda* states clearly that those who do not participate in *umuganda* will be fined with a fixed amount of FRW. 5000, this has not been implemented in many places, especially in relation to the monthly *umuganda*. Although there was no reason given to why the policy is not implemented, in practice it would be difficult for residents in rural areas who have little income.

However, leaders of *umuganda* in Kigali are strict about attendance. The transport association in Kigali is one example. On a further visit to Rwanda, in December 2011, the researcher used a motor bike as a means of transport from home to the local suburban market in Kigali. As we arrived, the rider was warned by his other taxis that he was going to be in trouble

⁸ A civil wedding in Rwanda is officiated by the executive secretary of the sector at the local sector office.

since he did not go to *umuganda* and have his *umuganda* card signed. Security guards in the areas were enquiring. Curiously I asked him what he would do. His answer is that he would have no choice but to pay a fine. Continuing the conversation, the researcher asked the motor rider what activities they had to perform for *umuganda* that day. With an unhappy face one of them responded: '*Imirimoyihe – se! ko arukudutesha umwanya gusa*' 'What activities! It is only wasting our time'.

Why then go to *umuganda* if it is a waste of time? Do leaders know that people feel it is a waste of time? Some participants mentioned that there are instances in rural areas where the local defence force arrests people, beat them and put them in jail for not participating in *umuganda*.

It emerged from the interviews that people also complied with the requirement of *umuganda* in their anxiety to avoid being seen as suspicious members of the community who could be regarded as a source of insecurity and then become isolated. In other words, the motivation to carry out *umuganda* is mixed with fear which can be conveyed in questions such as: 'How can people hear that I have remained home while others are doing *umuganda*? Would I be regarded as a rebel or a criminal or anti-social?'

Is there any relationship between participating in *umuganda* and a sense of nationalism? The need for belonging and the fear of government sanctions have a security dimension which could emanate from the violence, conflict and the legacy of the genocide. However, why should community participation be combined by threats of punitive sanctions?

Disagreeing with the idea of punishing people who do not attend *umuganda*, a community member argued:

Normally, *umuganda's* main objectives are for the community to volunteer their time to the country and also to bring together people living in the same community, as it is in our culture to help, share and socialize. But this is done as law and order, which one has to follow or otherwise be punished or pay a fine. Charging or punishing people for not attending *umuganda* sounds like looking for too much from people rather than sensitizing them to do it willingly. This makes *umuganda* turn from its primary definition and it becomes a mandatory forceful activity (Interview: Kigali 02 Jan 2011).

The Paradox of the Practice of Umuganda in Rwanda

Because of seeing *umuganda* as mandatory, some people have resented participating. One respondent said:

This is why I don't go to *umuganda*, because I don't like to do something just because I am forced to it. Even that card; I have not bought it and I don't carry it. I like to help and I like the idea of *umuganda* but I don't like the way it is being brought to us (Interview: Western Province 26 Dec 2010).

With such mixed reactions from participants in the focus group discussion one gave her opinion of what this means:

To be denied services means that, 'I cried for help you did not show up, when you cry for help I am not going to show up'. When the government does not see your hand when it needs it, you shouldn't expect its (government's) hand when you need it (Focus group discussion: Western Province 17 Dec 2010).

Both in Kigali and Western Province participants insisted that they do not agree with punishment by law for not participating in *umuganda*. However, one of the respondents explained:

I believe in the FRW 5,000 fine charged for missing *umuganda* but only as long as that fine is paid in the context of correcting someone. This will be like an act of discrediting someone for not socializing with others and not volunteering for the good of your country but not really a crime when put in the proper context (Focus group discussion: Kigali 30 Dec 2010).

A local leader in charge of *umuganda* and community mobilization explained that, 'When we find that the person does not participate in *umuganda*, we ask the person to pay the fine before we give him or her a requested document because if we don't do that, people will take *umuganda* lightly' (Interview: Kigali 17 Dec 2010).

Recalling that *umuganda* was initially indigenous practice, owned and organised by local community members, what, then, is the impact of government and political control of *umuganda*?

3. The Impact of Political Control on the Practice of *Umuganda*

While *umuganda* in its traditional form responded directly to the needs of the people, this study established that from the colonial period to the present *umuganda* has been and is used by government(s) to respond to political interests that are not necessarily beneficial to the ordinary people. Starting from the colonial period, *umuganda* was converted not only into a form of forced labour but also became a divisive tool that identified those who had to do extensive labour and were subjected to sanctions. This transformation of *umuganda* made life difficult for Rwandan society.

Currently, ordinary community members hardly initiate *umuganda*. The state has usurped *umuganda*, turning it into mandatory work, whether it benefits the population or not. Post-colonial regimes, including during the period after the genocide, have not restored *umuganda* to its original cultural value and practice. Instead, post-independence governments have enjoyed exercising their power and earning loyalty by maintaining colonial structures of governing free labour practice. This has led to three general problems.

- The first problem is with the governance of *umuganda* as it has become a state-owned and controlled program.

Umuganda has been state policy since the period of colonial rule. It was re-established in 1974, almost a decade after independence with different objectives, which continued until the period of genocide in 1994. After the genocide, *umuganda* was adopted by government once again in 2007 as a different policy with different objectives. It is currently found to be a system whereby the government propagates its different strategies to be implemented by locals.

Although some activities which are required for *umuganda* are found to be positive for the state's well-being, less attention is given to individuals' and communities' well-being. This is especially so for the rural population who are required to perform many hours of *umuganda* while having little time for their own activities. Respondents in this study, both from Kigali and Western Province, made it clear that ordinary people play a limited role in planning, organising and supervising *umuganda*.

The study indicated that the government of Rwanda has a history of intruding deeply into people's lives. It was learned that under colonial and post-colonial governments citizens had only limited freedom to speak, to challenge authority, to build a new and different life. The post-genocide government is still struggling with the same issues. This failure to deal with the legacy of the past has resulted in both leaders and ordinary citizens coming to live under fear, suspicion and mistrust.

The control of the practice of *umuganda* is more related to the state's own insecurity which, in turn, is rooted in past social and political instability. One cannot ignore the impact of colonialism and now globalisation on how the policies, especially for development, are conceived and implemented. While *umuganda* is expected to offer opportunities to the local people to interact with the authorities and to pose questions on matters that affect the local community and nation as a whole, this can mean the opposite as well. Government has used *umuganda* as a quick and efficient way to exert control. *Umuganda* has been used to sound out new laws and policies such as the Economic Development and Poverty Reduction Strategy (EDPRS), and then to force local people to implement them.

- The second problem is that *umuganda* is compulsory, with little benefit to ordinary people.

The compulsory nature of *umuganda* is evident in how it is organised and supervised, as well as in the use of sanctions to enforce participation. Most of the activities performed during *umuganda* are defined by government as community needs, which is not necessarily the case. While set objectives for any policy need to be respected, should not government officials listen to the community in order to assess the community's needs instead of making assumptions about what these needs are? The way in which the practice of *umuganda* is governed gives the supposed beneficiaries the sense of being forced to carry out government orders. This has resulted in local people's reluctance to participate as much as they might.

Explaining the state-imposed projects of change, Scott (1999: 3) notes that the state creates administrative orderings that grossly simplify nature and society to make complex issues more manageable. The system imposed in the governance of *umuganda* is clearly seen in its organization

and supervision by state functionaries, which in essence ensures that the state is able to enforce *umuganda*, yet it is not supposed to be enforced by any authority. *Umuganda* has thus been eroded of its non-authoritative component to become a signaller of state authority and to control functions which are embodied in governmental agencies.

The practice of *umuganda* is a law-enforced policy. Even though the policy of *umuganda* is formulated and approved by the elected representatives of the people in parliament, the punitive sanctions that accompany its implementation are not well received by many. It raises a question as to why Rwandans should be forced to participate in state development. Furthermore, the attendance card that needs to be presented and signed after undertaking *umuganda* determines who should have access to government services, such as travelling documents or official certificate. But every citizen in Rwanda has a right to government services. What then does the denial of services mean to those who do not attend *umuganda*?

This suggests a need to rethink certain punitive sanctions that are involved in the practice of *umuganda*. Perhaps local people should be allowed to decide what kind of punishments should be given to those who do not attend *umuganda*, with the aim of deciding what is fair to fellow citizens.

- The third problem is the utilization of *umuganda* to achieve free service delivery.

The practice of *umuganda* challenges the dominant notion of government delivering services through paid public servants. It was learnt that Kigali benefits from free and compulsory labour, which saves government revenue on opening city water channels, cleaning streets, building roads, schools, and health centres and so on. This implies that such social development practices are dictated by government at the expense of people's time and labour. Yet, services like these are found to be of little value in rural areas such as in the Western Province, where the majority of the population depends on domestic agricultural production for their everyday living. Should free, compulsory labour not be for the sake of meeting rural people's immediate needs to feed their families? There is a need for the policy of *umuganda* to be managed in providing services that not only restore the state's infrastructure but also improve the community's well-being in the long run.

Conclusion

Based on historical factors, it is observed that the essence, purpose, participation, and activities of *umuganda* changed during the arrival of missionaries and the colonial period. In the 1970s, the post-colonial government tried to re-emphasise and revitalise *umuganda*, but in a way that took a different path. While the initial idea was to maintain Rwandan cohesion and security and to increase household income, such public benefits were dominated by political interests, thus undermining the well-being of households and leading to more control and exploitation by those in power (Pottier 2006: 513).

Building on the precedent of the colonial period, the current government has used *umuganda* as an instrument of power to control the Rwandan people. Based on the past experience, the management and administration of *umuganda* is politically defined to respond to many various challenges that are facing post-genocide government. Among these are poverty reduction as well as unity and reconciliation. Nevertheless, the practice of *umuganda* is hardly meeting any of these challenges.

The present government's terminology in its policy on *umuganda* draws on an understanding of *umuganda's* traditional practice. In learning of the evolution of *umuganda*, from a voluntary household activity to a national state program, we see not only a considerable change in the original purpose of *umuganda* but also a change in understanding what the needs of the people are. Instead of the people defining their own needs, they are now being defined by the state.

Arguably, the government and political leaders have not stopped indigenous peoples from organising themselves for their own *umuganda* but their self-esteem has been swallowed by the consistent understanding that political leaders know what best is for the people. Thus, people sit and wait for the government leaders to identify and organise solutions for their problems and then claim government-generated and imposed solutions to be *umuganda*. This is not *umuganda* but is a means of social control, for society is no longer the organiser, initiator and implementer. The higher authority of the state is now able to sustain its control over society through organising *umuganda*.

The weakness of the practice of *umuganda* in the post-genocide regime is found in the governance of *umuganda* and the punitive sanctions

associated with its practice. These weaknesses are seen as stumbling blocks to community development in Rwanda, since a community does not grow because of government control but it grows by itself. This depends on the degree to which members of the community share values, especially the idea that they belong to a common entity that supersedes the interests of its individual members.

This study identified the occurrence of a spirit of suspicion among and within community members is transmitted into searching for identity and belonging. This is revealed when people decide to participate in *umuganda* because of fear that their neighbours will regard them as antigovernment, which again is translated by some indigenous as a genocide ideology. Hence, currently, the practice of *umuganda* presents both a sense of a combined consciousness of nation –building (governance) and genocide ideology. The two allow people to live in fear, to participate even when they might not wish to, in order to escape punishment and being put under suspicious status. Living and acting out of fear has huge consequences for people's development.

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