Public Religion after Genocide: Pentecostal Sounds and Voice in Rwanda

Andrea Mariko Grant

Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East, Volume 41, Number 2, August 2021, pp. 194-204 (Article)

Published by Duke University Press

Public Religion after Genocide

Pentecostal Sounds and Voice in Rwanda

Andrea Mariko Grant

In September 2013, I met Laurent, a serious-looking man in his thirties and founder of a gospel media company, for an interview at a coffee shop in Kigali, the capital of Rwanda. I had known Laurent for more than a year but wanted to have a more formal conversation with him about his career and his wider thoughts about the country's nascent gospel scene.[1] When I asked Laurent if anything distinguished Rwandan gospel music from others—from Kenyan gospel music, or Burundian—he told me that it had to do with the "promise" or "spiritual calling" that God had given the country. For Laurent, this spiritual calling was imagined on multiple scales: gospel music would transform the hearts of individuals so they became "good" Christians, which, in turn, would make Rwanda a Christian nation. This, in turn, would make Rwanda an example for the rest of the world.

Laurent was concerned, though, because gospel singers in the country were stuck; he raised his hand and flattened it to indicate a ceiling, his fist below to indicate the position of Rwandan gospel singers. Although many had gained national recognition, they couldn't seem to make it on the international stage; they were not yet "gospel stars," as he called them. Some had even given up on gospel entirely and switched to "secular" music, a trend that worried many Pentecostals I knew. To Laurent, the stuck-ness of gospel singers was in part technological—the vast majority of them didn't know how to use the new recording technologies that had become more widely available in the postgenocide period to their advantage, to marry, as he put it, technology with *le don* (gift, in this case musical gift, understood in the Pentecostal context to be a gift from God). Chuckling, he told me about a gospel singer he had first brought to the recording studio who hadn't known how to use a microphone, who had tried singing into it from the wrong side. This anecdote demonstrated the challenge Laurent had set himself: to teach Pentecostal singers that it was not through being an indistinguishable member of a church choir that they could best worship God; rather it was through using their individual voice.

I start this piece with my conversation with Laurent because I eventually came to realize that it was key to a question I had been puzzling over throughout my fieldwork on the "new" postgenocide Pentecostal or born-again churches in the country, whose adherents are called *abarokore* (the saved ones; sing., *umurokore*). *Abarokore* I knew seemed to be very concerned when young singers who had started their careers in the church turned to performing "secular" material. Here the distinction made was between singing "songs of God" or "gospel music" (*indirimbo z'Imana* or *umuziki wa gospel*) and "songs of the world" or "secular music" (*indirimbo z'isi* or *umuziki wa secular*). While the former sought to praise and worship God and assist Christians on their path toward heaven (*ijuru*), the latter could lead one to commit sins (*ibyaha*) on earth (*isi*). If we consider music as a way in which Pentecostals imagine not only coming closer to God but, in the Rwanda case, as realizing God's promise for the country, then it becomes clear why there seemed to be so much at stake in the kind of music that Christian artists decided to perform. When an artist seemed to switch musical focus, I suggest, it called into question not only their personal commitment to God,

Vol. 41, No. 2, 2021 · DOI 10.1215/1089201X-9127076 · © 2021 by Duke University Press

but the entire postgenocide Pentecostal project in the country—its moral authority and ability to offer something "new" especially against the Catholic and other mainline Protestant churches, which were seen to have been complicit in the 1994 genocide.

Joining scholarship that examines the relationship between media and religion, I suggest that in Rwanda debates about the kind of music Pentecostal artists should perform have to be contextualized in relation to two concerns: first, what we might call a Pentecostal "theology of sound," the belief that particular music and sound practices bring individuals closer to God; and second, changes within Rwanda's postgenocide media landscape.[2] The liberalization of the media in 2002, coupled with advances in recording technology, created new possibilities for *abarokore* to aspire to become individual "gospel stars" as opposed to choir members, in ways that they had been unable to before, which prompted debates about the nature of the postgenocide Pentecostal voice itself. Here I take voice as not merely a metaphor for individuality or political agency, but rather as having particular kinds of material properties that are evaluated within specific social, historical, and political contexts.[3] In its very materiality, some wondered, did the Rwandan Pentecostal voice sound too Western, too much like American "soft rock," as one music producer alleged? Was there no room here for the voice (*ijwi*) of "traditional" Rwandan music? If so, was the postgenocide Pentecostal project in Rwanda itself "foreign," concentrated in the hands of particular groups of Tutsi returnees?

Paying closer attention to sound and voice, then, can help us trace the specific ways in which Pentecostalism attempts to "go public"—that is, refuses to remain confined to "private life" and a matter of "personal beliefs"—and the kind of public it calls into being.[4] I'm particularly concerned here with the materiality of sound and voice, and the possibilities these materialities open up for Rwandan Pentecostals to realize God's promise for the country. In studies of gospel music in Africa, there is a tendency to focus on the lyrical content of particular songs, often in an effort to understand them as important forms of social and political critique.[5] Less attention has been paid to the kind of voice gospel music employs, and how this voice may butt up uneasily against local understandings of how the voice in song should sound. Yet tuning into voice can help reveal frictions in Christian publics at the material level.

In what follows I draw on fieldwork conducted in Kigali between 2011 and 2013, and again in 2018. I consider interviews with those involved in both the secular and Christian media—singers, promoters, producers—as well as attendance at Pentecostal services. I begin by briefly sketching out the historical and political context in which the new *abarokore* churches arose, before exploring their sound practices, particularly singing and the creation of "heavy" sonic atmospheres wherein miracles become possible. This paves the way for a discussion of the Pentecostal voice and its controversies. I conclude by considering how the authoritarian Rwandan government, led by the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), has cracked down on the new churches in recent years, partly under the guise of "noise pollution." Yet, despite this silencing, I consider Pentecostal radio, which was said to transform individuals whether or not they tuned in, and how this may reveal limits to RPF control. To this end, I ask, How might we take seriously sound's materiality, its transformative power that was imagined to be invisible and inaudible, in thinking about religious publicity?

Churches in Rwanda: History and Politics

The 1994 Rwandan Genocide resulted in the killing of 800,000 Tutsi and moderate Hutu in the short space of one hundred days. Among many other consequences, this profoundly reconfigured Rwanda's religious landscape. Before the genocide, Rwanda was predominantly Catholic, with approximately 62 percent of the population defining themselves as such, compared to around 18 percent who identified as Protestant, 8 percent as Seventh Day Adventist, and 1 percent as Muslim. Yet during the genocide the Catholic Church—and, indeed, its Protestant counterparts—did not speak out against the violence while it was taking place, and some priests and nuns even participated in the killings.[6] Churches, which had been sites of refuge in earlier periods of ethnic violence, became massacre sites as Tutsi who had sought refuge there were slaughtered; some of these churches, such as Catholic churches in Ntarama and Nyamata, now serve as genocide memorials for thousands of victims.[7]

According to Timothy Longman, the reason the Christian churches were complicit in the genocide can be traced back to the way the Christian message was first introduced to the country: this message was not one of "love and fellowship," but rather "one of obedience, division, and power."[8] What this meant in practice was that when the White Fathers, a Catholic missionary society, first arrived in Rwanda at the beginning of the twentieth century, they actively aligned themselves

with the powerful—in this case, with the king (*mwami*) and the Tutsi elite. The Hamitic hypothesis, a racist ideology that linked physiological features to intellectual ability to explain the complex hierarchical structures of the interlacustrine kingdoms, guided the official policies of the colonial state and the church. Since the supposedly Hamitic Tutsi were believed to be of Abyssinian or Galla origin and were therefore "naturally" superior to Hutu and Twa, they were given top places in Catholic schools and highly coveted positions within the colonial administration.[9] Although distinctions between Tutsi, Hutu, and Twa had existed prior to colonization, the arrival of the missionaries and colonial rule helped transform what had been more flexible socioeconomic divisions into rigid ethnic identities.[10]

While the Catholic Church initially backed the Tutsi elite, with decolonization and the Hutu revolution (1959–61), which culminated in independence in 1962, it began to back Hutu counter-elites and provide spiritual legitimacy to the subsequent Hutu republics under Grégoire Kayibanda (1962–73) and Juvénal Habyarimana (1973–94). Under Habyarimana in particular, Hutu nationalists such as Vincent Nsengiyumva—the archbishop of Kigali and an active member of Habyarimana's political party, the Mouvement révolutionnaire national pour le développement; he was later killed by RPF soldiers in June 1994—"dominated" Catholic leadership until the genocide.[11] While the Catholic Church may not have been directly involved in planning the genocide, they "played a central role in the creation and furtherance of racist ideology" that led to it.[12] It is in part due to this very history that when the RPF, the Tutsi-led rebel group that stopped the genocide in July 1994, took power, they regarded the mainline churches, particularly the Catholic Church, with hostility, in some cases forcing them to appoint pro-RPF leaders.[13]

Yet the RPF's mistrust of the mainline churches created a favorable environment for the founding of independent Pentecostal or charismatic churches after the genocide.[14] Indeed, this opening up of the religious field was unprecedented. Habyarimana's cozy relationship with the Catholic Church meant that his government actively intervened to "quash" any new religious movements from forming, in some cases jailing members of Christian "sects" when they refused to participate in government activities.[15] After the genocide, among the hundreds of thousands of Tutsi who returned to the country from exile in Burundi, Uganda, the DRC, Kenya, Tanzania, and further afield, were Pentecostal pastors who planted churches not only in Kigali but across the country.[16] These pastors brought a new form of Pentecostalism that emphasized the importance of accepting Jesus Christ as one's Lord and Savior, spiritual gifts, and prosperity in the present. One of these churches was True Revival Church (TRC), my main fieldwork church in Kigali, which had been founded in 1996 by Tutsi returnees from Congo.

This "new" Pentecostalism was in contrast to the "old" Pentecostalism of ADEPR (Association des églises de pentecôte du Rwanda), which had been founded in 1940 through Swedish missionaries. ADEPR espoused a more "conservative" form of Pentecostalism: women had to cover their hair and wear skirts, for one, and unlike the new Pentecostal churches, which were mostly returnee Tutsi, ADEPR was perceived to be Hutu-dominated.[17] This "new" Pentecostalism was also in contrast to the East African Revival of the 1930s, whose adherents had also called themselves *abarokore* and had similarly placed an emphasis on personal salvation.[18] In the postgenocide period, the impact of these "new" *abarokore* churches has been significant. According to the most recent census, 44 percent of the population now identifies as Roman Catholic, and 38 percent as Protestant, 12 percent as Adventist, 2 percent as Muslim, and 1 percent as Jehovah's Witnesses.[19] A majority of this 38 percent are affiliated to Pentecostal or charismatic congregations. Indeed, although in 1962 Rwanda had fewer than ten recognized religious organizations, by 2017, there were more than one thousand.[20]

Pentecostal Music and Noise in the Postgenocide Period

One of the appeals of these new churches is their focus on sound. As Birgit Meyer has pointed out, Pentecostalism across the globe tends to appeal to the senses, stressing the need to feel or be touched by the divine.[21] Music and charismatic preaching are key to this, allowing Christians "to sense the presence of the Holy Spirit *with* and *in* their bodies, wherever they are, and to act on such feelings."[22] Singing in particular is understood to be "the most efficient devic[e] for diverting the soul away from material reality and directing it towards the Divine."[23] Indeed, Pentecostal musicians are often understood to be "vessels" for the anointing of the Holy Spirit, allowing for the healing of believers' bodies and the receiving of divine blessings.[24]

This is precisely how Fabrice, a young man in his twenties who was the worship leader at TRC, explained the role of praise and worship music, known in Kinyarwanda as *guhimbaza Imana*. "Praise and worship is like

a journey," he told me. "It's like a journey from here to God, from yourself to God. The choir is like a car that takes the church." It was through music that *abarokore* left the secular world behind, opening up the possibility for miracles and blessings. Fabrice himself had had such an experience. He told me that when he was singing, someone at TRC came up to him and gave him $200; someone else offered to pay his school fees. Music had also led to Fabrice's own salvation. In 2004, he had attended a special New Year's celebration at another Pentecostal church in the city. "In the time of praise and worship," he told me, "I felt something. . . . I felt someone in my heart, and I felt that I had to repent my sins." He even remembered the particular lyrics to the Kinyarwanda praise song that had so moved him, which spoke of God as the source of love (*urukundo*) and truth (*ukuri*).

Katrien Pype argues that Pentecostal/charismatic popular culture can be understood as a "live" popular culture. Pentecostal songs, television serials, films, and websites—to mention just a few—are "live texts" because they have an active role in creating religious subjects; they emphasize the immediate and spontaneous; and they foreground the "lived," or "the bodily experience of the spiritual battle and God's miraculous interventions."[25] In the Rwanda context, furthermore, the liveliness of Pentecostal music was viewed as in contrast to the "boring" liturgical music encountered in the mainline churches, particularly the Catholic Church. Fabrice had left the Catholic Church precisely because its sound practices were, if not dead, muted. He had not had a similar experience of feeling someone in his heart during mass.

Yet it was not only singing that was understood to be important for urban Rwandan Pentecostals. Here I highlight briefly the importance of "noise" more generally. For some Pentecostals, it was the dense sonic atmospheres of church services that allowed for God's presence, with music acting as just one element. Patrick Eisenlohr describes atmospheres as "quasi-objective entities that spread in a given space, touching and enveloping bodies of those perceiving them in a way that exceed single, definite sensory impressions."[26] This is useful because unlike the concept of soundscape, which "suggests a three-dimensional auditory space that a listener is confronted with," the notion of atmospheres instead "attends to the intermingling of sound and the felt-body."[27] Sonic atmospheres, he writes, enact "suggestions of movement," not only through discursive means but through the material qualities of sound itself, through changes in loudness, pitch, or frequency.[28]

I briefly describe here a special healing and deliverance service at TRC wherein multiple kinds of sound combined to create an atmosphere "heavy" with God's presence. After prayers and a long praise and worship session, Pastor Herve, the head pastor of TRC, declared that God would solve our problems. "This evening," he exclaimed, "people will change names! Miracles will be received by man! What you were never able to do, God will enable you to do!" "*Injira*" [enter], he yelled over and over again, meaning that church members needed to step forward, to enter into the place of divine miracles and blessings. At this point, the church was almost ecstatic, with people shouting and crying, and everyone around me jumping up and down. "There is someone who's always cold, who never feels heat," Pastor Herve intoned. "Tonight, you will feel heat!" Each prophetic word was met both by more cheering from those in the church, and drum rolls and short piano melodies by the church band. Pastor Herve spoke in tongues, then led us in a song to give glory to God.

After we finished singing, Pastor Herve declared that there was a "heaviness" in the air. "It is the heaviness of the glory of God," he explained. "In this glory, ask God what you want. In such an atmosphere of heaviness, I don't think there is a way God can deny us anything." Furthermore, in such an atmosphere, he said, witchcraft was impossible. The "heavy" atmosphere of the church was constructed not only through sounds, but also through other senses. When I had first arrived at the church, I had noticed there was a burned smell in the air, like burning plastic. Pastor Herve explained, however, that the smell was the scent of God, yet more evidence that the evening was special. In the days following the service, a number of church members gave testimonies of healing and miracles.

In the Pentecostal sound economy, then, music, "noise," and, as we will see, radio frequencies were all understood to bring individuals closer to God and have transformative effects on hearts, minds, and bodies.

The Problem of Gospel "Stars"

Given the importance of Pentecostal sounds, when singers who started in the church started singing about more "worldly" topics, they came under severe criticism. For *abarokore*, while gospel music can bring them closer to God, the converse was also true: "secular" music was understood to be satanic, capable of taking individuals down the "wrong" path, usually associated with drugs, alcohol, and promiscuity.[29] For example, a widely shared piece of gossip claimed that a musician

who played in the backing band of the popular national music competition, Primus Guma Guma Super Star, was kicked out of his Pentecostal church.[30] Since the competition was sponsored by a beverage company that brews beer, he was accused of performing for beer, instead of for God. Fabrice underscored for me the danger of performing secular music. "Some spiritual Christians say that when you sing a song of some star, like maybe Michael Jackson, his spirit can take you, if you're not strong in God's things," he told me. "His spirit can take you and you end like him, even if you're a Christian, because [of] the spirit behind [it]." Although Fabrice admitted he sometimes listened to secular music and sang secular songs, he was only able to do so because he was strong spiritually. In addition to his role as worship leader, he also had a consistent prayer life.

When I asked Claude, a married father in his early thirties who was a musician and involved in TRC's choir, why it was a problem for gospel artists to sing secular music, he told me, "What I know is that people have to have focus on what they're doing, in what they believe. If you do things without focus, it is easy to change without any—you can change however. So those guys, they started in church. Like [popular singer] Mani Martin started when he was young. And what he was singing [then] is different to what he is singing today. So, I can say that he changed." Here Claude was referring to Mani Martin, a talented young singer who had started out singing at ADEPR. As his career progressed, however, he started singing about topics that were considered to be worldly.

Yet this concept of worldly music was blurry—while in some cases it referred to music that had overt themes of sexuality or drug use, in others it referred to songs that did not take God as their main reference point. For example, one of Martin's offending "secular" songs was "Icyo dupfana kiruta icyo dupfa" ("That Which Unites Us Is Greater Than That Which Separates Us"). The song asks listeners to question why things such as jealousy and ethnicity keep people apart when they are more similar than they realize. It has the following chorus:

Tukaririmba amahoro	Sing peace
Tugasakaza amahoro	Spread peace
Tugatura mu mahoro	Live in peace
Tugahumeka amahoro	Breathe peace

Although the song became immensely popular, to Martin's critics, because it did not directly address God or make clear peace came from God, it was seen as evidence that Martin had changed in the "wrong" way. Criticisms of Martin were also related to a change in his musical style. His earlier gospel songs, such as "*Urukumbuzi*" (which speaks of longing for God), had a slower, more somber melody while "*Icyo dupfana kiruta icyo dupfa*" had a more upbeat, reggae-influenced style. Since to many Pentecostals reggae was associated with paganism—because singers often had dreadlocks and were perceived to be heavy users of alcohol and marijuana—Martin's new sound was perceived as decidedly un-Christian.

These same critiques about an artist's musical focus did not seem to be made against those outside of *abarokore* churches. For example, I was once at a recording studio in Nyamirambo, a neighborhood of Kigali, with Mani Martin and several other singers. They had gathered together to write a song to commemorate a young musician, Henry Hirwa, who had died unexpectedly. As Martin was recording his vocals, I struck up a conversation with a young singer who was contributing to the song. I told him that I liked his recent single—an R and B love song that had become quite popular among the city's youth. In the course of our conversation the singer mentioned he was Catholic and still sang in the choir of his church. "They don't mind that you're singing secular songs?" I asked him. "No, we're Catholics, we're like that," he told me with a smile. The implicit comparison here was with Pentecostal churches, like Martin's, who were *not* like that.

In order to understand this—Why was it unacceptable for Pentecostal musicians to perform "secular" music but acceptable to Catholics?—we need to consider both theological and technological factors. Before the genocide—and, indeed, immediately after it—the vast majority of Christian music was sung by choirs.[31] While choral music is still undoubtedly popular in Rwanda today—ADEPR and the Adventist church are known for their excellent choirs—I suggest that the Pentecostal emphasis on cultivating a personal relationship with God converged with changes in recording technology (and the liberalization of the country's media), creating new possibilities for Pentecostals to praise and worship God through the individual voice. Suddenly, Pentecostal singers could dream of becoming, in Laurent's words, "gospel stars." Indeed, this is precisely why Laurent had started his gospel media company in mid-2000. Before he started it, he told me, "it was not possible for a solo artist to just stand up and say, 'I'm going to the studio, I'm going to do an album.'" His company had helped make this possible and when I interviewed him in 2013, he had over a dozen clients.

Yet accompanying this rise of gospel singers was a newfound sense that an individual singer was repre-

senting an individual church and, to some extent, the "new" Pentecostal faith. With the rise of entertainment radio talk shows and entertainment websites, there were new public places to discuss the intimate details of young performers' private and public lives.[32] This increased public scrutiny meant that Pentecostal artists were expected by their churches and pastors to be model Pentecostals: they had to perform a stable, consistent, "focused" (in Claude's words) persona in order to stave off accusations by some that the new Pentecostal churches were merely businesses, profiting from the trauma of Rwandans.

The consistency of Pentecostal artists was seen as especially important, I suggest, because of the moral authority the new churches claimed for themselves after the genocide. Since they had not been in the country leading up to and during the tragedies of 1994, they presented themselves as—and were popularly perceived to be—less tainted than the mainline churches. Indeed, this point was brought home to me by Aimable, a middle-aged man who had been involved in founding the country's first Christian radio station, Umucyo Radio (Light Radio), in 2005. When I asked Aimable why the Pentecostal churches had seen such a rise after the genocide, he told me that the genocide had "broken" the mainline churches that had been in the country. It was only the churches that had come from outside afterward that could preach the message, that could say with any kind of conviction, "God is good."

When Pentecostal singers decided to sing about "worldly" themes, the very Pentecostal project in Rwanda itself was shaken: if God had chosen a particular singer to transport Christians closer to him, what did it say about God when this singer seemed to turn away from him? Was God's promise for Rwanda really from God or was it the work of the devil, as the genocide had been? Was the transformative power of sound being used to "good" or "bad" ends?

The Pentecostal Voice

Yet if individual voices were now able to praise and worship God in ways they had been unable to do so before, this gave rise to questions about the "correct" kind of voice that was most appropriate to employ. This tension became clear to me in a discussion with Emmanuel, a well-known music producer. I had been introduced to him at a music festival and assumed that he was a secular music producer. It was only when I went to visit him at his studio one day and saw him working with gospel singers—a female singer who was well known in Rwanda and an aspiring female singer from Burundi, both of whom were clients of Laurent—that I realized he also produced gospel music. Emmanuel considered himself an *umurokore* and had been praying at a Pentecostal church since 2005. To get him talking, I asked him what I thought to be quite a straight-forward question: Do you produce gospel music? His answer, however, surprised me. He responded,

> I do. But for me, real, I don't know, I'm not wrong—if I'm wrong, I don't know, but—like in [Pentecostal] churches you feel like sometimes they play this soft rock. Or American stuff. Why? It's fine, but why can't we look at our own way, like Rwandese, to worship God with our culture? If they [aspiring gospel singers] come, they want to sing like Darlene [Zschech, an Australian Pentecostal singer], Kirk Franklin [an African American gospel singer]. For me, it's nice, I produce it, but I don't like it. They should look for a way to do some Rwandan modern music. Like, God needs our culture too. If God created Rwanda, he needs Rwandese to worship as Rwandese.

Here Emmanuel pointed out that when Pentecostal audiences demanded that singers sing only gospel songs, they were, unconsciously or not, advocating for a particular kind of sound: for a kind of American "soft rock" that had been developed in Western contexts for Western Christians with Western instruments. This kind of voice was associated with singers such as Darlene Zschech and Kirk Franklin, and, to Emmanuel, had nothing to do with Rwandan musical traditions and a particular kind of Rwandan voice. This view was reiterated to me by the well-known Rwandan musician Jean-Paul Samputu. "When you go to a church, you will find guitar," he explained to me during an interview, shaking his head sadly, pointing out that no Pentecostal church in Kigali used traditional instruments such as *inanga* (trough zither), *umuduri* (musical bow), *ikembe* (thumb piano), or *umwirongi* (flute) in its worship. Although Samputu's musical career has encompassed many different styles, after he was saved in 2003, he started fusing traditional Rwandan music with praise and worship music, particularly on his 2006 album *Voices from Rwanda*. Yet, as I discuss below, this fusion was considered problematic by some *abarokore*.

Emmanuel saw this lack of "traditional" musical elements in contemporary Rwandan gospel music as an affront to Rwandan musical culture and a failure to root the Pentecostal message in Rwandan soil. Indeed, unlike the "soft rock" that Pentecostal pastors seemed to be demanding, Emmanuel pointed out that traditional Rwandan music was defined by its 5/8 rhythm and by a

particular character of the voice (*ijwi*—which can mean both "sound" and "voice" in Kinyarwanda). Alongside the use of traditional instruments, this style of vocalization, which relies on "tight vibrato or melisma," marks certain music as "traditional."[33] When I asked Emmanuel to describe it, he offered this definition: "It's bluesy, it's real blues. You know it's somehow blues. But—it's really emotional. You know. [He sings in a "traditional" style.] At the end they come low so much, it's really emotion they sing. Up down, up down. They're like the endings they are coming down, all of them. [Again, he sings this for me, his voice deepens.] They come up then they come back down." While on the surface comparing the Rwandan voice to American blues seems contradictory, I think Emmanuel used it because it was the only "Western" equivalent that he could find—blues, in its emotional intensity, was the closest thing to traditional Rwandan music.

Regardless of its ties to the blues, however, the Rwandan voice was considered the ultimate expression of a certain sense of Rwandan identity. Emmanuel's comments above echo comments made to me during my fieldwork in the summer of 2018. Traditional singers—and other cultural figures—described the voice of traditional Rwandan music as mimicking the physical landscape of Rwanda itself: like the country's hilly geography—Rwanda, after all, is often called the land of a thousand hills—so too did the Rwandan voice trace these peaks and valleys, these "ups" and "downs," in Emmanuel's words. In recent decades, this style of voice has encompassed the country's complex musical past. On the one hand, it was used by Tutsi singers in exile during the Liberation Struggle to encourage support for the RPF before, during, and after it invaded the country in 1990 and sparked a civil war. On the other, it was used by Hutu propagandists, most notoriously by "traditional" singer Simon Bikindi, to incite violence during the genocide. It was understood as embodying hope and possibility, but also violence and loss.

Yet the reason many *abarokore* found the Rwandan voice problematic was not because of this recent musical history. Rather, it was because of its associations with "traditional" Rwandan religious practices, which *abarokore* consider to be pagan. For example, Fabrice told me he liked some traditional Rwandan songs, but not all of them, because they "talk about the [old] gods of Rwandans, Ryangombe, Nyabingi." Here he was referring to two important *imandwa*, "spirits of powerful heroic figures," who had large followings in the country.[34] In order for the *imandwa* to intercede on one's behalf, spirit possession rituals (*kubandwa*) were practiced. When Samputu fused traditional Rwandan music with gospel, he used musical styles associated with *kubandwa*, which drew ire from devout *abarokore*. This, despite the fact that the lyrics to these songs praise God.[35] This maligning of traditional music has a long history in the country. When Christian missionaries arrived in Rwanda, they banned it precisely because of these associations, although they eventually permitted drums to lead Christian songs.[36]

Later in our conversation, Emmanuel spoke in particular of TRC as not only propagating a Western "soft rock" sound, but also as sounding far too Congolese. He pointed out, "[At TRC] you feel like they do Congolese music. Di-di-di, praise. [When] they're done with the praise, there's not even a Rwandese tune. [He claps out a 5/8 rhythm]. God needs to see that too. The culture he gave us, he needs to see that praise and worshipping him. Why doing like Congolese? We are Rwandese." Indeed, because TRC had arrived in Rwanda from the Congo, and since the vast majority of its pastors and leaders were Congolese (for the most part Congolese Tutsi, even), they failed to sound "Rwandan." To Emmanuel, as much as the church aimed to minister to Rwandans, to provide Rwandans with new hope and new vision, it was still sonically "foreign"—it did not (and could not) sound Rwandan.

Of course we must complicate these assertions of vocal authenticity and place them firmly within the context in which they arose.[37] As Amanda Weidman has argued, "ideologies of voice"—ideas about how particular kinds of voices should sound—are culturally constructed, having their roots in specific social, political, and historical contexts.[38] This idea of the "traditional" and "authentic" Rwandan voice, one that arises naturally from the land of Rwanda itself, emerges in a post-genocide context wherein it is seen to be under threat, at risk of disappearing due to a host of factors: the loss of irreplaceable singers and cultural figures during the genocide, the rise of new technologies that make the manufacture of voices in the studio easy to do, the perceived disinterest of the country's youth in "traditional" music, and the widespread popularity of Pentecostal churches themselves.

In mostly using this soft rock style, the new churches have made it so that this appears to be the "natural" voice of Pentecostal practice in the country. Yet what Emmanuel seemed to be saying is that another kind of voice, a voice that incorporates Rwandan rhythms and a "bluesy" vocal quality, would convene a different kind

of Pentecostal public, one that, indeed, would perhaps be more sonically appealing to not only Tutsi returnees, but Rwandans, both Hutu and Tutsi alike, who had been born and raised in the country, the so-called *abasope*. And, indeed, going forward, that this kind of voice would be better positioned to help manifest God's promise for the country so that it might include all (Christian) Rwandans.

Writing of European-style classical singing or *sŏngak* in South Korea, Nicholas Harkness argues that the Presbyterian Christian singers who dominate the genre aim to cultivate a "clean" voice, one that is contrasted negatively with the "sad," "harsh," and "unpleasant" voice of traditional Korean music.[39] This valorization of a "clean" voice, he tells us, is caught up in a particular Christian narrative of progress: the voice should not sound sad, because South Korea has achieved God's grace. Yet Harkness also points out that to some non-Christians, the dominance of *sŏngak* has resulted in loss—that in some sense the past associated with traditional Korean music is no longer (vocally) accessible. We can see a similar dynamic at work here. To some Rwandans like Emmanuel, although the Pentecostal voice indexed hope, new transnational connections, and new possibilities for Rwanda's postgenocide future, it was ultimately built on a voice that was constructed by some as "foreign," a voice that sought to displace what had come before.

Sound and the State

Despite the differences that Pentecostals asserted between Christian and "secular" sounds, there was one overarching similarity: the kinds of sound they were able to make were ultimately controlled by the state. Since 2014, the RPF has cracked down on "noise pollution" in Kigali, targeting Pentecostal churches, nightclubs, and bars, with offenders facing fines and imprisonment.[40] In February 2018, the Rwanda Utilities Regulatory Authority shut down a Christian radio station, Amazing Grace FM, for airing a sermon that was widely condemned for its misogyny. During the sermon, Pastor Nicholas Niyibikora reportedly claimed that women were "evil" and "against God's plan."[41] For some, the Niyibikora case drew attention to exactly what the "new" churches were teaching and contributed to the government's decision to crack down on the churches a little over a week later. At the end of February 2018, more than seven hundred churches in Kigali and one mosque were shut down for violating regulations related to safety, hygiene, and noise; those who defied these orders were fined or arrested.[42]

While in other contexts gospel music has the ability to elude state censorship—or, at a more intimate scale, speak about issues normally left unspoken in church sermons—in Rwanda this silencing extends to Christian singers who are critical of RPF rule.[43] The most relevant example here is that of Kizito Mihigo, a popular Catholic singer and peace and reconciliation activist who was sentenced to ten years in prison in 2015 for plotting to kill President Paul Kagame and inciting hatred against the government. Yet many believed a song he had released prior to the twentieth commemoration of the genocide, "Igisobanuro cy'urupfu" ("The Meaning of Death"), was the "real" reason he was targeted. In the song, Mihigo, a genocide survivor, suggests that those whose lives "were brutally taken but not qualified as genocide" should be remembered. This was interpreted as a call to remember Hutu killed by the RPF during the genocide and afterward, which contradicts the "official" narrative about the genocide that only Tutsi were victims.[44] Although Mihigo was later released through presidential pardon in 2018, he was rearrested in February 2020 near the border with Burundi, apparently attempting to flee the country. Several days later, he was found hanged in his police cell in Kigali. While the "official" cause of his death was suicide, some remain suspicious, believing he was killed by the government.

There are steep consequences, then, for using song to break "official" silences. However, when we turn our attention to the materialities of sound, another perspective emerges. For some Pentecostals, it was not necessarily the discursive content of songs that mattered but rather the materiality of sound itself—its inaudible power. Here I return to Aimable, the Christian radio entrepreneur mentioned above. When I spoke to him in early 2012, he told me that to celebrate Umucyo Radio's seventh anniversary, they had recently conducted some research into the radio's effects. According to Aimable, this research had found that wherever Umucyo Radio broadcast, there had been no killings in that area. In twenty cases of killings, he told me—and here he was speaking of killings that took place within families, giving me the examples of men killing their wives or their sons—not one of them had taken place in Umucyo Radio's broadcast territory.

While Aimable didn't explain to me how exactly this research was conducted, what was most interesting about his comments was that he didn't necessarily stress that these results had been caused by those who had listened to the radio; rather, the implication was

that the mere broadcasting of these Christian airwaves to these regions had transformative effects. It was not the words of certain sermons or even the materiality of Pentecostal voices that would make Rwandans Christians (or better Christians) but rather sound as physical phenomena, as vibrations that move through air and touch bodies and hearts whether or not one was conscious of it or not.

Although the RPF's new "noise pollution" regulations are aimed at producing an orderly, silent public, one wherein its own messages are amplified, Pentecostal sounds attempt to disrupt this sonic hierarchy. Instead, Pentecostals imagine a public wherein sound, in its audible *and* inaudible effects, transforms Rwandans into exemplary Christians, making the country, despite its difficult past, an example for the world.

Conclusion

Paying closer attention to sound and voice helps us to better trace the embodied and material ways in which Rwandan Christians wrestle with their faith after the genocide. What did it mean to be Christian after not only such devastating loss but also the complicity of church leaders and everyday Christians? That the new *abarokore* churches seemed to bring something new—in particular, a new sound economy that insists on the transformative power of music, noise, and radio airwaves—offered new possibilities for coming closer to God in a context wherein some felt that the violence of the past had inserted a profound distance.

In castigating gospel artists who started performing "worldly" music, we can see *abarokore* struggling with the ambiguity of sound's transformative power—it could bring individuals closer to God, further along on their journey toward heaven, or it could lead them astray. It is this ambiguity too which seems to be why the RPF has increasingly cracked down on what it has deemed "noise," particularly in the country's capital. In the Rwanda case, these concerns are well founded. During the genocide popular singers and radio announcers were heavily involved in disseminating extremist Hutu propaganda and contributing to a sonic "atmosphere" wherein it was permissible, even according to God's will, to kill Tutsi.[45] If we take seriously Aimable's logic, it was not necessarily just the words broadcast on Rwanda's "hate media" radio stations before and during the genocide that had such tragic effects: the soundwaves, oriented not toward God but the devil, might have equally worked on Rwandans and closed their hearts, priming them to participate in the killings. In contrast, the *abarokore* churches attempt to offer a different kind of atmosphere, to recuperate sounds by orienting them toward God, in the hopes that this atmosphere will envelope not only the country and the region, but the world. Even if, in relying on sound, this project is itself inherently unstable. And, in insisting on a certain style of Pentecostal voice, this project silences another kind of voice, one that, to some, has the ability to convene a much larger and more inclusive public, a voice that is able to embody, in its very materiality, the "ups" and "downs" of the country's complex past.

Andrea Mariko Grant is a fellow of Churchill College, University of Cambridge.

Notes

1. In suggesting that the gospel scene is "nascent" in Rwanda, I do not mean to say that Christian music as a whole was nonexistent in the country prior to the genocide. Far from it. Rather, I'm suggesting that the postgenocide period has seen new opportunities for individuals to become "gospel stars," rather than becoming members of (even well-known) choirs. Although someone like the seminal pregenocide figure Cyprien Rugamba was known for his compositions—in a style that combined traditional singing with Gregorian chant—his music was sung by choirs.

2. Eisenlohr, "Suggestions of Movement"; de Witte, "Altar Media's Living Word"; Meyer, *Sensational Movies*; Meyer and Moors, *Religion, Media, and the Public Sphere*; Hirschkind, *Ethical Soundscape*; Pype, *Making of the Pentecostal Melodrama*.

3. Harkness, *Songs of Seoul*; Inoue, "Listening Subject of Japanese Modernity and His Auditory Double"; Kunreuther, *Voicing Subjects*; Weidman, "Anthropology and Voice."

4. Engelke, *God's Agents*.

5. Chitando, "'Come Down, O Lord!'"; Lamont, "Lip-Synch Gospel"; Parsitau, "Sounds of Change and Reform."

6. Gatwa, *Churches and Ethnic Ideology in the Rwandan Crises*; Longman, *Christianity and Genocide in Rwanda*.

7. Smith and Rittner, "Churches as Memorial Sites."

8. Longman, *Christianity and Genocide in Rwanda*, 10.

9. Linden, *Church and Revolution in Rwanda*; Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers*; Prunier, *Rwanda Crisis*.

10. Vansina, *Antecedents to Modern Rwanda*.

11. Carney, "Far from Having Unity," 96.

12. Ndahiro, "Church's Blind Eye to Genocide in Rwanda," 230.

13. Longman, "Limitations to Political Reform"; van 't Spijker, "La rivalité des alliances."

14. van 't Spijker, "La rivalité des alliances."

15. Longman, *Christianity and Genocide in Rwanda*, 92–93.

16. Kubai, "Post-genocide Rwanda."

17. Sundqvist, "Reconciliation as a Societal Process."

18. Peterson, *Ethnic Patriotism and the East African Revival*; Ward and Wild-Wood, *East African Revival*.

19. NISR and MINECOFIN, "2012 Population and Housing Census."

20. Republic of Rwanda, "Note on Regulating Faith Based Organizations in Rwanda."

21. Meyer, "Aesthetics of Persuasion"; see also de Witte, "Touched by the Spirit."

22. Meyer, "Aesthetics of Persuasion," 742.

23. Pype, "Liveliness of Pentecostal/Charismatic Popular Culture in Africa," 359; see also Engelke, *Problem of Presence*, 201.

24. Marshall, "Indigenizing Navajo Hymns;" see also Grant, "Noise and Silence in Rwanda's Postgenocide Religious Soundscape."

25. Pype, "Liveliness of Pentecostal/Charismatic Popular Culture in Africa," 372.

26. Eisenlohr, "Suggestions of Movement," 39.

27. Eisenlohr, "Suggestions of Movement," 39.

28. Eisenlohr, "Suggestions of Movement," 41.

29. Oosterbaan, "Sonic Supremacy," "Spiritual Attunement."

30. For a further discussion of this competition, see Grant "The Making of a 'Superstar.'"

31. van 't Spijker, "Credal Hymns as Summa Theologiae."

32. Grant, "Bringing *The Daily Mail* to Africa."

33. Ong'are, "Music and Reconciliation in the Aftermath of the 1994 Rwandan Genocide," 103.

34. Longman, *Christianity and Genocide in Rwanda*, 37.

35. Swanson, "Voice of Rwanda."

36. Mbanda, *Committed to Conflict*, 32–33.

37. Harkness, *Songs of Seoul*; Inoue, "Listening Subject"; Weidman, "Anthropology and Voice."

38. Weidman, "Anthropology and Voice," 45.

39. Harkness, *Songs of Seoul*.

40. Times Reporter, "Police Arrest Nine over Noise Pollution."

41. Mugisha, "Rwanda Shuts Radio for 'Hateful' Sermon against Women."

42. Mwai, "Seven Hundred Churches Closed in Kigali over Standards."

43. Chitando, "'Come Down, O Lord!'"; Lamont, "Lip-Synch Gospel."

44. Mwambari, "Music and the Politics of the Past."

45. Chrétien, *Rwanda*; Thompson, *Media and the Rwanda Genocide*.

References

Carney, J. J. "'Far from Having Unity, We Are Tending towards Total Disunity': The Catholic Major Seminary in Rwanda, 1950–62." *Studies in World Christianity* 18, no. 1 (2012): 82–102.

Chitando, Ezra. "'Come Down, O Lord!': Music, Protest and Religion in Zimbabwe." *Scriptura* 96 (2007): 334–47.

Chrétien, Jean-Pierre. *Rwanda: Les médias du génocide*. Paris: Karthala, 1995.

de Witte, Marleen. "Altar Media's Living Word: Televised Charismatic Christianity in Ghana." *Journal of Religion in Africa* 33, no. 2 (2003): 172–202.

de Witte, Marleen. "Touched by the Spirit: Converting the Senses in a Ghanaian Charismatic Church." *Ethnos* 76, no. 4 (2011): 489–509.

Eisenlohr, Patrick. "Suggestions of Movement: Voice and Sonic Atmospheres in Mauritian Muslim Devotional Practices." *Cultural Anthropology* 33, no. 1 (2018): 32–57.

Engelke, Matthew. *God's Agents: Biblical Publicity in Contemporary England*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013.

Engelke, Matthew. *A Problem of Presence: Beyond Scripture in an African Church*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007.

Gatwa, Tharcisse. *The Churches and Ethnic Ideology in the Rwandan Crises, 1900–1994*. Bletchley, UK: Paternoster, 2005.

Grant, Andrea Mariko. "Bringing *The Daily Mail* to Africa: Entertainment Websites and the Creation of a Digital Youth Public in Post-Genocide Rwanda." *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 13, no. 1 (2019): 106–23.

Grant, Andrea Mariko. "The Making of a 'Superstar': The Politics of Playback and Live Performance in Post-Genocide Rwanda." *Africa* 87, no. 1 (2017): 155–79.

Grant, Andrea Mariko. "Noise and Silence in Rwanda's Postgenocide Religious Soundscape." *Journal of Religion in Africa* 48, no. 1–2 (2018): 35–64.

Harkness, Nicholas. *Songs of Seoul: An Ethnography of Voice and Voicing in Christian South Korea*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014.

Hirschkind, Charles. *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2006.

Inoue, Miyako. "The Listening Subject of Japanese Modernity and His Auditory Double: Citing, Sighting, and Siting the Modern Japanese Woman." *Cultural Anthropology* 18, no. 2 (2003): 156–93.

Kubai, Anne. "Post-genocide Rwanda: The Changing Religious Landscape." *Exchange* 36, no. 2 (2007): 198–214.

Kunreuther, Laura. *Voicing Subjects: Public Intimacy and Mediation in Kathmandu*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014.

Lamont, Mark. "Lip-Synch Gospel: Christian Music and the Ethnopoetics of Identity in Kenya." *Africa: The Journal of the International African Institute* 80, no. 3 (2010): 473–96.

Linden, Ian. *Church and Revolution in Rwanda*. Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1977.

Longman, Timothy. *Christianity and Genocide in Rwanda*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

Longman, Timothy. "Limitations to Political Reform: The Undemocratic Nature of Transition in Rwanda." In *Remaking Rwanda: State Building and Human Rights after Mass Atrocity*, edited by Scott Straus and Lars Waldorf, 25–47. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011.

Mamdani, Mahmood. *When Victims Become Killers: Colonialism, Nativism, and the Genocide in Rwanda*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001.

Marshall, Kimberly Jenkins. "Indigenizing Navajo Hymns: Explaining the Fame of *Elizabeth and Virginia*." In *Making Congregational Music Local in Christian Communities Worldwide*, edited by Monique Marie Ingalls, Muriel Swijghuisen Reigersberg, and Zoe C. Sherinian. London: Routledge, 2018.

Mbanda, Laurent. *Committed to Conflict: The Destruction of the Church in Rwanda*. London: SPCK, 1997.

Meyer, Birgit. "Aesthetics of Persuasion: Global Christianity and Pentecostalism's Sensational Forms." *South Atlantic Quarterly* 109, no. 4 (2010): 741–63.

Meyer, Birgit. *Sensational Movies: Video, Vision, and Christianity in Ghana*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015.

Meyer, Birgit, and Annelies Moors, eds. *Religion, Media, and the Public Sphere*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006.

Mugisha, Ivan R. "Rwanda Shuts Radio for 'Hateful' Sermon against Women." *East African*, February 13, 2018. www.theeastafrican.co.ke/rwanda/News/Rwanda-shuts-radio-for-disparaging-women/1433218-4303088-5k87sx/index.html.

Mwai, Collins. "Seven Hundred Churches Closed in Kigali over Standards." *New Times*, February 28, 2018. www.newtimes.co.rw/section/read/229466.

Mwambari, David. "Music and the Politics of the Past: Kizito Mihigo and Music in the Commemoration of the Genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda." *Memory Studies* 13, no. 6 (2020): 1321–36.

Ndahiro, Tom. "The Church's Blind Eye to Genocide in Rwanda." In *Genocide in Rwanda: Complicity of the Churches?*, edited by Carol Rittner, John K. Roth, and Wendy Whitworth, 229–49. St. Paul, MN: Aegis in association with Paragon House, 2004.

NISR and MINECOFIN. "2012 Population and Housing Census: Provisional Results." Republic of Rwanda, 2012.

Ong'are, Peter Okeno. "Music and Reconciliation in the Aftermath of the 1994 Rwandan Genocide." PhD diss., Durham University, 2015.

Oosterbaan, Martijn. "Sonic Supremacy: Sound, Space, and Charisma in a Favela in Rio de Janeiro." *Critique of Anthropology* 29, no. 1 (2009): 81–104.

Oosterbaan, Martijn. "Spiritual Attunement: Pentecostal Radio in the Soundscape of a Favela in Rio de Janeiro." *Social Text* 26, no. 3 (2008): 123–45.

Parsitau, Damaris Seleina. "Sounds of Change and Reform: The Appropriation of Gospel Music and Dance in Political Discourses in Kenya." *Studies in World Christianity* 14, no. 1 (2008): 55–72.

Peterson, Derek R. *Ethnic Patriotism and the East African Revival: A History of Dissent, c. 1935–1972*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

Prunier, Gérard. *The Rwanda Crisis: History of a Genocide*. London: Hurst, 1998.

Pype, Katrien. "The Liveliness of Pentecostal/Charismatic Popular Culture in Africa." In *Pentecostalism in Africa: Presence and Impact of Pneumatic Christianity in Postcolonial Societies*, edited by Martin Lindhardt, 345–78. Leiden: Brill, 2015.

Pype, Katrien. *The Making of the Pentecostal Melodrama: Religion, Media, and Gender in Kinshasa*. New York: Berghahn, 2012.

Republic of Rwanda. "Note on Regulating Faith Based Organizations in Rwanda." July 28, 2018. gov.rw/newsdetails2/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=1965&cHash=192e92c6213bcoff-46617c86e114a7d1.

Smith, James M., and Carol Rittner. "Churches as Memorial Sites: A Photo Essay." In *Genocide in Rwanda: Complicity of the Churches?*, edited by Carol Rittner, John K. Roth, and Wendy Whitworth, 181–205. St. Paul, MN: Aegis in association with Paragon House, 2004.

Sundqvist, Josephine. "Reconciliation as a Societal Process: A Case Study on the Role of the Pentecostal Movement (ADEPR) as an Actor in the Reconciliation Process in Post-genocide Rwanda." *Svensk Missionstidsskrift* 99, no. 2 (2011): 157–95.

Swanson, Brent. "The Voice of Rwanda: An Ethnomusicological Biography of Jean-Paul Samputu." PhD diss., University of Maryland, 2014.

Thompson, Allan, ed. *The Media and the Rwanda Genocide*. London: Pluto, 2007.

Times Reporter. "Police Arrest Nine over Noise Pollution." *New Times*, October 13, 2014. www.newtimes.co.rw/section/article/2014-10-13/181880/.

Vansina, Jan. *Antecedents to Modern Rwanda: The Nyiginya Kingdom*. Oxford: James Currey, 2004.

van 't Spijker, Gerard. "Credal Hymns as Summa Theologiae: New Credal Hymns in Rwanda after the 1994 War and Genocide." *Exchange* 30, no. 3 (2001): 256–75.

van 't Spijker, Gerard. "La rivalité des alliances: Les églises après le génocide rwandais." In *Concurrences en mission: Propagandes, conflits, coexistences (XVIe–XXIe siècle)*, edited by Salador Eyezo'o and Jean-François Zorn, 1–14. Paris: Karthala, 2011.

Ward, Kevin, and Emma Wild-Wood, eds. *The East African Revival: History and Legacies*. Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2012.

Weidman, Amanda. "Anthropology and Voice." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 43 (2014): 37–51.