

Did the author write her memoirs before Hamas launched its attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, and before demonstrations in support of terrorists broke out on American campuses and in European cities in the name of fighting Israel, the ultimate symbol of colonialism and oppression of peoples? We do not know.

It is very much to be feared that after the destruction of Slonim, and all the Slonims of Poland, Ukraine, and **Belarus [or Belarus? see above]**, after the loss of their language and religion, after abandoning left-wing ideals, the Jews descended from "our homeland" have lost yet another illusion, that of embodying the oppressed of the earth.

It is possible that at the end of the ninety-year journey proposed by Élise Marienstras, all that remains is the pain of absence, illustrated by the portraits of the missing persons to whom the last pages of the book are devoted.

*Boris Czerny*

Christian PARIOT

### **La Chanson au cœur du génocide des Tutsi. Rwanda 1994**

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Paris, L'Harmattan, "Études africaines" collection, October 2025, 195 pages, €22

On December 2, 2008, singer Simon Bikindi was sentenced to fifteen years in prison by the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda. The potentially genocidal nature of his songs was the subject of expert reports and numerous debates during the hearings. However, their role in inciting killings during the genocide perpetrated against the Tutsi was not taken into account, as the tribunal argued that they had been composed prior to the genocide and thus fell outside the strict time frame of its jurisdiction. The singer was therefore convicted of direct and public incitement to commit genocide (Bikindi was seen in June 1994 speaking from atop a vehicle equipped with a megaphone), while the other charges against him were dropped.

But beyond the lyrics of the songs, perhaps the judges did not pay enough attention to the performative nature of the music itself, which was reduced to mere background noise. For Christian Pariot, "Simon Bikindi's music was anything but background music, as the Chamber of the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda described it in its judgment. Through its visceral link to tradition, so ingeniously maintained and constantly reiterated, it was the objective guide and ally of the killers. Never, perhaps, has music been assigned to such violence, and never has its hold on bodies and minds led to such disaster" (p. 58).

Christian Pariot, author of this highly original work, is a doctor of music, choir director, and ethnomusicologist specializing in sub-Saharan musical heritage. He has written several works on traditional Burundian singing. Here, he defends the idea—which is sure to spark debate—that there is a close interconnection between the language of song and the political context. By articulating itself with political configurations, song has thus been "shaped by events." Whether inciting violence, singing of exile and combat, or serving as a vehicle for memory and reconstruction, Pariot shows

"how and to what extent the logic of the protagonists and the circumstances had shaped very different repertoires, creating strongly contrasting forms and languages for each of them" (p. 171).

The analysis, based on extensive scholarship and technical expertise, is divided into four parts corresponding to both chronological sequences and vocal repertoires: genocide songs, liberation songs of the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) and its supporters in the diaspora, songs of remembrance, and "post-genocide reconciliation songs."

The author suggests that this evolution was an opening up to other languages in order to strive for universality, a moving beyond the traditional musical framework—claimed by the genocidal proponents of "Hutu power" as a reflection of their claim to "ethnic purity" — through forms open to otherness and cross-fertilization, without "stray[ing] from the musical path laid out by the elders."

Forty-one songs are analyzed throughout the pages. The lyrics for each song are provided in the original Kinyarwanda and in French translation. The musicological analysis is accompanied by musical transcriptions and useful appendices, including one devoted to the pentatonic mode (a musical scale composed of five pitches), which is the musical system of reference in traditional Rwandan melodies. While specialists will find plenty to discuss and fuel their own reflections, novice readers will be grateful to Christian Pariot for finding the words to explain these technical aspects in layman's terms and make the overall subject accessible. Until now, a few studies had been devoted to the role of music as a weapon of propaganda, a tool for cultural mobilization and resistance, or to songs of memory as a form of cultural expression. Building on these pioneering analyses by Rémi Korman, Assumpta Mugiraneza, Benjamin Chemouni, and Jason Mccoy, this book fills a gap in the historiography.

By striving to contextualize and historicize the conditions under which the songs were produced and disseminated, the book is more than just a simple collection of songs. However, the significant portion devoted to aesthetic dimensions can sometimes detract from a more historical perspective. The first part, which returns at length to the case of Bikindi, analyzes how the formal structure of his songs matches their thematic content. In keeping with the musical tradition he represents

## READING NOTE

Sometimes leaning toward the "traditional-modern," Bikindi displays a mastery of intonation, shifting between singing and speaking, using a declamatory style in which slogans and "devastating words" (p. 60) are repeated. He sings, chants, and thus rallies the crowds. For Pariot, this has a formidable deadly effectiveness, which is deployed during the genocide: "The hysteria of the music combined with the power of sound and exhaustion could only have a devastating effect on the crowds at the rallies" (p. 56). In support of this thesis, a few pages, somewhat too short, are devoted to the songs sung by the killer gangs to the sound of drums and whistles, opening the door here to a sound history of the genocide. We would have liked the author to have given even more space to the influence, briefly mentioned, of Bikindi's songs broadcast on RTLM, with the reference to the "sons of the farmer" (title of the song *Bene Sebahinzi*) sometimes even serving as a rallying cry and encouragement for militiamen to carry out identity checks at roadblocks.

In the second part of the book, devoted to songs of struggle and exile, calls for return to the homeland and liberation open up to other musical perspectives, ranging from spontaneous songs (partly improvised, transmitted orally, sung initially a cappella and known from later recordings) to more sophisticated arrangements. The analysis of these songs, for example those produced by the artistic troupe *Indahemuka* (The Faithful) from the RPF, shows how the melody becomes galvanizing and persuasive. The author provides a few brief but valuable insights into how these songs, which enliven the evenings of RPF soldiers, "begin to circulate underground within the country" (p. 65) thanks to recorded cassettes. As for the songs produced by the Rwandan diaspora, particularly in Belgium, they play an essential role in fundraising. Here we are introduced to artists such as Suzanne Nyiranyamibwa and Kamaliza (Annonciata Mutamuriza). These women from the diaspora were among the first to compose original songs of mourning. It was necessary to overcome the shock caused by the discovery of the extent of the atrocities committed, to find suitable forms to express the "unspeakable" and to overcome the inevitable "melodic aporia" (p. 171). For the author, "it is mainly through song that the memory of the genocide has been expressed" (p. 104), even if this consideration seems to us to somewhat overlook the role of literature in this regard.

The third and fourth parts of the book follow this journey of songs of remembrance and their dual function of memorialization and therapy. In Nyarubuye, Éric Senduri sings in *Turiho* (We Are Alive) about the memory of survivors who escaped the massacres, "saved by the rain" and the sorghum fields where they hid. This eleven-minute song is a series of testimonies: "The chorus is sung by the choir of survivors with great gentleness. It combines tonal writing and punctuation in F major with pentatonic-inspired phrases."

(p. 156). With the new generations, other musical forms are developing, blending pop music and gospel, for example (the churches' efforts to seek forgiveness and ease tensions with the Rwandan state are not unrelated to this growing influence of church songs). With Grace Mukankusi, Bonhomme, and Joe Musinga, a new breath of fresh air is heard, where "emotions are liberated" (p. 161). Beyond the remarkable stylistic analyses, the presentation of the political context could have been refined by examining more deeply the processes of politicization at work during the commemorations and in the reconstruction/reconciliation advocated by the authorities.

Christian Pariot's work is therefore of great interest. At the crossroads of history and ethnomusicology, it opens up new heuristic perspectives for understanding Rwandan history through song, helping us to continue to reflect on the modalities and effects of genocide by allowing music to "speak."

*Samuel Kuhn*