# Is rebuilding a nation's international image a question of discourse? The controversial case of Rwanda: a destination of the dark

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**Résumé:** Le tourisme noir (eng. dark tourism), ou le tourisme à caractère révérenciel, est une forme contemporaine du tourisme de niche, qui prend récemment des proportions de plus en plus considérables parmi les chercheurs, de même que dans la pratique du tourisme. Rwanda nous relève une multitude de facettes que le discours peut engendrer au niveau sociopolitique. Question d'ethnie et de revendication territoriale, y compris du pouvoir, le coup d'Etat superposé au génocide, événement tragique qui a ébranlé le monde africain en 1994, représente un véritable creuset d'investigation discursive. En quête de la vérité, notre travail se penchera sur l'image que Rwanda cherche aujourd'hui à se faire à l'étranger, au-delà des voix oblitérées par des secouements totalitaristes. De cette manière, on va analyser comment ce pays réussit à s'en sortir graduellement de son drame, grâce au discours avec un message universel – le tourisme, et la manière dont cela devient visible sur les sites Internet spécialisés en conseil de voyage. En fait, le voyage au Rwanda représente l'hommage que le Monde offre, même s'il s'agit du niveau d'une expérience littéraire, car, à travers le discours littéraire, on descendra aux lieux tragiques avec l'écrivaine ivoirienne Véronique Tadjo.

**Mots-clés**: tourisme noir, discours, manipulation, pouvoir, site Internet, voyage.

## 1. Introduction

Dark tourism, referred to in literature as 'fatal attraction' tourism, 'disaster' and 'conflict' tourism (Ryan, 2005: 199) is a recent concept and research area which has been recognized as an existing phenomenon after mid-1990$^{s}$. It is generally acknowledged that tourism as a social phenomenon may be responsible and at the same time may assess a certain 'mood' of the society at a certain moment in mankind's history: "tourism is a mirror in which many of the 'secrets' of modern life and modern exis-



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tential conditions become visible and clear" (*apud* Ryan, 2005: 189). With respect to this, specialists argue that "new, emergent forms of tourism represent significant shifts in people's understanding of society that rejects many of the core ethical understandings of modernity that reduces people to being ciphers in productive processes" (*idem*: 188).

Recent literature of dark tourism confers extrapolated functions of it. A new form of market opportunity, at first, associated with sites of horror and destruction, dark tourism seems eventually to trigger questions on *dark* issues of the contemporary society. In our opinion, dark tourism stands for an interdisciplinary *postmodern/late modern* branch of tourism which challenges identity in terms of historical tragedies; the landscapes of the collective memory locate identity through a symbolic journey in the past; as Lennon & Foley define tourism as "the visitation to any site associated with death, disaster and tragedy in the twentieth century for remembrance, education or entertainment". We can also state that dark tourism represents a reverential trip of a *group* toward a place where the glimpses of nationhood advertise themselves among the ruins; as a nation constitutes a *group* entity "whose members cultivate common myths, memories, symbols and values, possess and disseminate a distinctive public culture, reside in and identify with a historical homeland, and create and disseminate common laws and shared customs" (Leoussi; Grosby, 2007:3).

Another aspect of dark tourism touches upon nowadays' type of individual/consumer/tourist and his/her motivations which prompt the choice for a touristic destination or another. It was investigated that the basic desires which fuel the choice of a dark touristic destination, standing also for a motivational factor, are: 1) facts and knowledge – tourists want to learn both in cognitive and affective directions; 2) historical interest on the site; 3) the fascination with the abnormal or Bizarre.

The first two may be connected to the desire of *sympathizing with the underdog* (Ryan, 2005:196). In our acceptation, as humanists, we may allow ourselves to assert that eventually, the utmost function that dark tourism accomplishes is *catharsis.*

As dark tourism questions the errors of modernity (the era since the period of enlightenment, referring to humankind's scientific and mechanical developments, as per Lennon & Foley's 2000 definition), we trace at the same time the importance of memory in the reproduction of nations.

According to the Institute of Dark Tourism Research website, dark tourism "is now a recognisable field of academic study, which includes interdisciplinary perspectives of the 'darker side of travel' in sociology, anthropology, cultural studies, geography, thanatology, and business management" (http://dark-tourism.org.uk). We also retain important for us



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the fact that "dark tourism as an academic field of study is where death education and tourism studies collide and, as such, can shine critical light on the social reality of death. Dark tourism can also reveal tensions in cultural memory, interpretation and authenticity, and political and moral dilemmas in remembering our 'heritage that hurts'" (*Ibid*.).

**2. Domination and race. A History of the Colonisers and the Colonised**

Rwanda had known along history two major colonising episodes: firstly, in 19th century, due to exotic expeditions that thrilled European spirit in that period, Germans decided that it was high time to conquer and design Rwanda as a monarchy. Secondly, after WWII, it has been decided that Belgium took the country under its administration and surveillance.

The country has always been divided under racial criteria in two ethnic groups, which led to frequent local clashes and ethnic hatred; furthermore, the history was such prescribed for Rwanda that both Colonisers favoured the minority Tutsi to the majority Hutu in ruling the country. Especially between the two World Wars, when eugenics and anthropology reached utmost interest among scientists and within various circles of interest, Tutsi were mostly encouraged into accessing education, power and wealth, due to theories which would compare genetic structures such as the skull's size and level of intelligence, or due to the fact that Germans attributed Hamitic origins – considering thus Tutsi more 'European' than Hutu. Belgium administration also encouraged the development of the identity electronic card which specified whether the individual belonged to Hutu or Tutsi. Yet, in 1962, the proclamation of Independence conferred the power to the majority Hutu and proclaimed Rwanda as a democratic republic. Lots of Tutsi were then banished and forced to withdraw at the borders of the country or even immigrate in neighbour countries. It is in exile that Tutsi learned better the concept of the *common group aim* and prepared for a counter-attack in order to re-establish, as they thought, justice in the country. After decades of unrest, Tutsi refugees irritated mostly when in 1972, a Hutu president was elected for the second time. As Tutsi's belief in an ancient inherited ruling right, exacerbated by colonial interests, their propensity for domination determined the strengthening of group organisation; this led gradually to the apparition of the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF). But former guerrilla Tutsi formations had already been heard since the proclamation of Independence. The assassination of President Juvénal Habyarimana represented the climax of Tutsi rebellion which triggered official Civil War in 1994. More elegantly put, a *coup d'état* was prompting on the background of the Genocide, and



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RPF leaders took immediately the government and the media under direct ruling.

### 3. Policies of discourse and national reconstruction

The rush for power through the means of weapons is continued 20 years after the genocide on the international scene of debate, through more subtle means – discursive ones. All these years, many controversial voices have risen around Paul Kigame, the actual president and his former RPF allies. Is he a rescuer or a dictator? Are his policies peace makers or trouble makers on a long term? These are just a few questions that international authorities still try to find an objective answer, beyond history's true or forged facts.

Re-establishing peace and equality after 'commended' hatred toward one group or another, in the context of a massive genocide and counter-genocide represents today rather a matter of *discourse responsibility*. Contradictions, persuasion, imperatives, arguments and counter-arguments are some of the key-words that characterize a pre-packed discourse about 1994 tragic events and constant efforts of national reconstruction since. Today, the country is again divided between genocide deniers and non-deniers. After 20 years from the tragic event and many other decades of violence, the only power which now rules Rwanda, is, we say, the power of discourse. In his work *Power and Discourse*, Teun A. Van Dijk brings together three key-words: power, discourse and control:

> If discourse controls minds, and minds control actions, it is crucial for those in power to control discourse in the first place. How do they do so? If communicative events not only consist of 'verbal' text and talk but also of a context that influences discourse, then the first step of discourse control it to control its contexts. (Dijk, 2008: 10).

In our case, Rwandan reconstruction and progress under Kigame regime keeps to be underlined in parallel with clarifying allusions and references to 1994 moment, as we can observe in the following excerpts of presidential discourses – the highest power authority, and thus discursive authority:

> To make clear what I mean, allow me to say a few words about how Rwanda approached the task of rebuilding after the Genocide in 1994, not only economically, but also, and actually more fundamentally, socially and politically. [...]
> Let's recall where it started. Two years after the Genocide, more than two million Rwandans, among them many perpetrators, returned home to a deeply fractured nation. Living side by side with those who survived, the urgency of national reconciliation and justice was clear. […]
> Rwanda's economic and social development is built on political development and strong institutions. We have emphasised the importance of consensus-building, national unity, and accountable public institutions. […]



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> It is sometimes said that Rwanda's economic and social achievements are somehow offset by a lack of democracy and popular voice. The truth is exactly the opposite. What is commonly perceived as Rwanda's biggest weakness, is actually its greatest strength. […]
> *As Rwandans travel and get connected through ICTs, the world's curiosity about Rwanda, is being matched by Rwandans' curiosity about the world*. And we are finding that our country's story means something positive to people, beyond Rwanda. *We are no longer just the country of Genocide; perhaps we even have something to offer, as a nation, to others*. (emphasis mine, President Kagame's speech at Chatham House, London, 21 October 2014: http://www.paulkagame.com/)
> There are unambiguous truths about the Genocide against the Tutsi that are beyond dispute, despite continuous efforts at distortion, whether by revision or denial. It is not surprising that such efforts exist. Seventy years after the end of the Holocaust, the fight to protect against the falsification of historical record is never-ending. (President Kagame Address at Tufts University Community, Boston, 22 April 2014: http://www.paulkagame.com).

## 4. How to rebuild a nation('s) (image) through (*dark*) *tourism*

As Stone asserts in his book *The Darker site of Travel*, "darker sites which revolve around tragic accidents or intentional killing and which subsequently provoke dialogue with regard to commemoration politics and aesthetics or private grieving in public places have, again, received a significant amount of attention" (Stone, 2009: 18). In addition to this, the author recognises the affinity between tourism and politics, as 'the state may assume the role of marketer of cultural meanings, in which it attempts to make a statement about national identity by promoting... [through tourism] ...selected aspects of a country's cultural patrimony" (Cano &Mysyk, 2004: 880 in Stone, 2009: 149). He also identifies genocide among a range of themes that could be packed and presented publicly as products for consuming death, tragedy or disasters. Thus, we can say that Rwanda finds itself as a destination which constructs a certain *place narrative* through dark tourism and subsequent advertising tools. A major example is *TripAdvisor* American site, an authority in online travelling advice, where we find that among several entries for the 'things to do in Kigali' rubric, this destination has two destinations-places (or sub-destinations) awarded *Travelers' Choice™ 2014 Winner Attractions*: Nyamata Church and Kigali Memorial Centre (http://www.tripadvisor.com/Attractions-g293829-Activities-Kigali_Kigali_Province.html). According to the site, the visitor rating gets 48 points Excellent for Ntarama Church destination, described in the most recent view as: "Devastating, but an absolute must for anyone who relates emotionally to the genocide. It was a unique privilege for me to be there and to feel the pathos with my own heart"; Nyatama Church created an impact of 72 points Excellent and has



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been classified in the latest visitors' comments as "A Poignant Reminder"; eventually, 484 points Excellent in the case of the Kigali Memorial Centre – "An outstanding recap" as stated in the first line of the most recent comment. The virtualtourism.com site identifies also other locations, offering as well pictures and short descriptions: The Rwandan Parliament, The Belgian Monument, Hotel Rwanda, Genocide Memorials, Ntarama Genocide Memorial and Nyatama Genocide Memorial.

**5. Narratives of remembrance. Travelling testimonials: e-text *vs.* literature**

An interactive way of sharing travel-related content, TripAdvisor represents, in our opinion, a great virtual book of visitor's testimonies. But literature can at its own turn become a source of such rendered literarily travel experience, which goes beyond the media filter, depicting a genuine and spontaneous emotion. Thus, we believe that any text, be it a piece of literature or a piece of online visitor testimonial is a source of a *virtual voyage for the reader*. As Veronique Tadjo, an Ivorian writer confesses in her novel[1] *L'Ombre d'Imana. Voyages jusqu-au bout du Rwanda,* travelling to Rwanda crystallized the case of genocide beyond a media subject and meant, at a personal level, an intimate, cathartic experience to be further communicated:

> Cela faisait longtemps que je rêvais d'aller au Rwanda. Non, « rêver » n'est pas le mot. Cela faisait longtemps *que je voulais exorciser le Rwanda*. Me rendre à l'endroit même où ces images télévisées avaient été filmées. Ces images qui avaient traversé le monde en un éclair et laisse une marque d'horreur dans tous les esprits. *Je ne voulais pas que Rwanda reste un cauchemar éternel, une peur primaire*. (emphasis mine, Tadjo, 2000: 13)

Here, we can draw a parallel between the two types of 'literatures' – online and written, recognized as a genre *per se*. We can observe common intrusions of a reciprocal gazing (visitors and locals) in the following excerpts describing Ntarama Church destination-place – in TripAdvisor testimonials and in Tadjo's narrative instance:

> ÉGLISE DE NTARAMA – Site de génocide + ou – 5000 morts.
> Chevelure blanche et visage serein, le petit vieux a un regard interrogateur. *Il observe les visiteurs en les jugeant, les évaluant, les dépouillant de leurs masques*. Il sait tout de suite les cataloguer: ceux qui vont détourner les yeux face au spectacle de la mort exposée, ceux qui vont se révolter, ceux qui vont pleurer, ceux qui vont rester silencieux, ceux encore qui vont poser des questions, stylo à la main, ceux qui cherchent encore à rationaliser, à comprendre, ceux qui vont lui donner de l'argent et ceux qui n'oseront pas, ceux qui écriront: «Plus jamais ça !» (*Idem*: 25)

[1] A novel as a genre, that we rather account at the crossroads between novel and war journal, thus between literature and journalism.



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"WELL PRESERVED REMINDER OF THE GENOCIDE"
Ntarama Church is incredibly well preserved and a powerful reminder of the genocide. The piles of clothing in the church block a lot of light, which is quite fitting considering the circumstances. Belongings of the victims are on display, as are human remains. A few other buildings are on the premises, including a school where children hid and were ultimately found by those peforming the genocide. A large red stain where the atrocities were carried out spoke volumes about the utter brutality. This site was very difficult to visit but absolutely worth it. Definitely highly recommeded for anyone visiting Rwanda.
(Visited November 2014; source: www.tripadvisor.com)

The two texts reveal the mythical *meeting* between the locals and the visitors and portray the experience from a third person point of view in the first case, and first person point of view in the second one. In Tadjo's text, a survivor of the genocide *gazes* at the visitor who is now a mere text to be read beyond its very signifier – the mask. Visitor's reactions as signified elements are further compiled and reiterated in a process of a feed-back 'stylo à la main'. A prolonged echo of this very feed-back communicated on the spot, is then rendered to a whole online community sharing the same values, where the character's proposition in the book of testimonials «Plus jamais ça!» becomes now expressed in a text, or, more precisely, in an e-text.

## 6. Conclusions

Our insight in the heart of Rwanda has made us realize even better that a nation's image depends on a polyphonic discursive strategy mediated, in this case, by means of voyage literatures at all levels and genres. Today's virtual means of expression (included literature as a form of imaginative travelling through space and time) remove spatial constraints, discard fear of otherness and of past errors, shedding thus light and life on postmodern touristic destinations.

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