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Abstract

Rwanda and the Question of Commonwealth Relevance

Rwanda’s accession to the Commonwealth is often cited as a reason for the organisation’s continued relevance. And yet, in spite of this positioning as poster child for a more cosmopolitan Commonwealth, there is very little evidence, in the corpus of Commonwealth literature, to show how accession of states such as Rwanda boost the argument for relevance. In 2015, I travelled to Rwanda to gain an understanding of the effect that Commonwealth membership has had on the country and vice versa. Using this evidence, I draw conclusions about the effect that Rwanda and the Commonwealth have had on each other.

**Keywords:** Rwanda; Commonwealth; relevance; human rights; cosmopolitanism

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# Introduction

It has become something of a cliché for officials from the Commonwealth to respond to questions about the continued relevance of the organisation with the observation that a number of countries with no previous connection to the former British colonial power, such as Burundi and Madagascar, are evincing an interest in membership. Each of these states has, in recent years, been accused by international human rights organisations of having more than questionable approaches to human rights promotion and protection, particularly in the areas of freedom of speech, freedom of association, unlawful killings, and the arbitrary arrest of opposition party members, civil society workers, and journalists (see Human Rights Watch, 2017). Although these states have yet to initiate any serious moves in the direction of official admission processes, in the past two decades there have been two successful membership bids from African states with no previous colonial links to Britain; these are Mozambique and Rwanda. While the accession of both of these members has provided fuel for a continuing debate on the relevance of the organisation, it was Rwanda - with its troubling human rights record and increasingly draconian policies - that threatened the greatest impact on both the shared values and the shared history of the Commonwealth.

This was a key argument put forward by critics who were firmly against Rwanda’s application for Commonwealth membership. For many of these opposing voices, the Rwandan government, in the fourteen years between the genocide and its application to the Commonwealth, had not done enough to prove a demonstrable commitment to human rights and democracy, and therefore had no real evidence to underpin any commitment to the Commonwealth principles enshrined in the Harare Declaration. One of the fiercest critics of Rwanda’s accession to the Commonwealth was Yashpal Ghai, a Kenyan law professor and specialist in constitutional law. In an eighty-two page report for the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative, Ghai (2009) detailed his own observations alongside the voices of a growing number of key critics who shared the view that, both in the area of democratic principles and human rights, the Rwandan government’s promised commitments to unity and diversity through, for example, the acceptance and inclusion of multiple political parties and an independent civil society, were largely confined to the realm of rhetoric (see also Prunier, 1999; Reyntjens, 2006). In spite of these criticisms, however, the tiny East African state was ‘warmly welcomed’ into the Commonwealth at the Heads of Government Meeting in Trinidad and Tobago in 2009 (CHOGM Communiqué, 2009).

When I first began my research project in 2013 on the question of Commonwealth relevance to African states, I expected the corpus of Commonwealth literature to be replete with references to Rwanda. Curiously, however, this was not the case. Despite the furore over Rwanda’s accession, its membership has been relatively low key, proving to be one of the more boring and less newsworthy or controversial members of the Commonwealth family. This, of course, works in the Commonwealth’s favour providing much needed ammunition for the ever increasing barrage of questions around relevance directed towards the organisation’s loyal band of supporters, who, even as the most enthusiastic defenders of the Commonwealth’s significance, as Philip Murphy (2018) has quite scathingly observed, ‘often seem unable to provide any very convincing reasons for their enthusiasm.’ However convinced these supporters might be, if Rwanda’s membership continues to be put forward as evidence of the continued relevance of the Commonwealth, might a better understanding of the kind of impact Commonwealth membership has had on its newest family member be in order?

In January 2015, I travelled to Rwanda to carry out interviews with the aim of gaining insight into how Rwandans understood their government’s decision to join the Commonwealth, whether they thought that Commonwealth membership had had any effect on Rwanda, and what, if anything, they thought Rwanda brought to the Commonwealth family table. I conducted approximately 10 semi-structured interviews with a range of elites mainly in the capital city of Kigali. These included civil society representatives from national and international organisations, political activists, trade unionists, youth leaders, and academics. My respondents included mostly actors who belonged to various circles of interest and involvement, some had a loose connection to the Commonwealth through working for large INGOs with Commonwealth observer status or as Commonwealth youth leaders, while others simply engaged in or observed Rwandan politics. The information gathered from these interviews enabled me to get insight into the political landscape in Rwanda, to understand Rwandan opinions on the government’s decision to join the Commonwealth, and to get a feel for any effects Commonwealth membership had ushered in.

While elite interviews were one source of data collection, because the number of interviews I was able to carry out was small, they are set here against information I gained from reading INGO and Commonwealth reports, by studying local Rwandan media related to Rwanda’s application and accession to the Commonwealth, and by informal discussion with ordinary Rwandans that I met on a daily basis in and around the neighbourhood of Kimihurura, where I stayed during my fieldwork. My interviews consisted of three main questions. Firstly, what did the interviewees think drew Rwanda to the Commonwealth when it was already a part of the Francophonie? Secondly, what effect did they think Commonwealth membership had had on Rwanda? (*What gains had the country received to date?*) And thirdly, how did they think that the Commonwealth had benefitted from Rwanda’s membership? My rationale behind asking these questions was to test a claim made by Will Jones (2014, p. 347), one of a very small number of critics to devote attention to Rwanda’s Commonwealth membership since its admission to the organisation, that Rwanda was, ‘an important test case for the Commonwealth’s attempted transformation into a relevant international organisation animated by adherence to principles of liberalism and democracy.’

Over the next four sections I try to paint a picture of how Rwandans see the Commonwealth and how they understand Rwanda’s role in the organisation. I begin with some background to Rwanda’s application. I discuss the general consensus among Commonwealth Heads of Government in favour of Rwanda’s accession and contrast this with opposition raised by human rights groups and the divided literature on progress in Rwanda. In the second section, I examine the Rwandan government’s motivations for joining the Commonwealth. I discuss how interviewees describe the reasons behind Rwanda’s accession and the extent to which they believe Commonwealth membership has had an effect on their state. In the third part, I discuss the ways in which interviewees conceive the Commonwealth in the context of what Rwanda’s membership brings to the organisation. I examine their sense of Rwanda’s position as the newest member of the group, and the ways in which they believe Rwanda’s experience of major loss and recovery can benefit the Commonwealth. The article ends by contextualising some of the elements discussed in the main body of the article alongside the findings in the wider literature on Rwanda. Here I briefly discuss the darker side of Rwandan politics and conclude that while theoretically an exemplar state for the Commonwealth to test its cosmopolitan credentials, in practice Rwanda’s membership has not lived up to the hype.

**Background: Rwanda’s accession**

Rwanda joined the Commonwealth in 2009, following an official review of the organisation’s membership criteria, which had been formalised in 1997 after the accession of Mozambique. While Mozambique’s application had been unanimously endorsed as a ‘unique and special case,’ because of the country’s role in supporting anti-apartheid efforts and its unofficial status as a ‘cousin’ of the Commonwealth (te Velde, 2010, p. 96), Rwanda’s application was an altogether more divisive matter. As a state with no constitutional connection to Britain and no connection of historical worth, Rwanda presented the Commonwealth with something of a dilemma: change the rules and allow a more open and inclusive Commonwealth, thus risking the dilution of one of the organisation’s essential features - its unique family atmosphere; or, turn Rwanda away and relinquish the chance to grow its cosmopolitan credentials by becoming a more universal organisation that could for the first time claim to put shared values above the uniqueness of shared history.

For many of the Commonwealth’s keenest observers, the state of Rwanda’s fragile recovery, following the 1994 genocide, made the decision to admit the troubled state risky (Bourne, 2010; Ghai, 2009). While on the one hand, evidence showed that Rwandans were more prosperous and safer, as far as health issues were concerned, than ever before, as Frederick Golooba-Mutebo and Valarie Chambers (2012) have pointed out, Rwandan women were less likely to die in childbirth, more children were in school, and there was a substantial decrease in malaria;on the other hand, the government in Rwanda practices a deft authoritarianism which it claims is a necessary measure to ensure that ethnic violence does not return to Rwanda (Human Rights Watch, 2005; Straus and Waldorf, 2011). One example of this authoritarianism is the government’s policy outlawing ethnicity as a form of identity (Hintjens, 2008; Kiwuwa, 2012).

For Ghai (2009), the decision to admit Rwanda would set a precedent for future applications, it was therefore critical that it was made with care and consideration for human rights and democracy. Under the new Commonwealth membership criteria, states needed to be willing to commit themselves to support for peace, liberty, and international cooperation and stand out against racial discrimination, colonial domination, and wide disparities of wealth (Bourne, 2010; Collinge, 2008; McIntyre, 2008). They needed also to demonstrate a commitment to democracy and democratic processes, good governance, and protection of human rights (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2007). While Rwanda could demonstrate a democratic process, its commitment to other civil and political rights, such as freedom of expression and association, was a different matter (Melvin, 2010; Reyntjens, 1995), and this posed serious problems for those who opposed the application.

For heads of state in support of Rwanda’s application, Commonwealth membership would help Rwanda to overcome its weaknesses in these areas. As they saw it, Rwanda’s accession to the Commonwealth was a way to ‘consolidate a post-genocide democracy with development’ (Bourne, 2010). With strong support from the African Commonwealth, as well as from Britain, Rwanda’s efforts to meet the conditions of the Harare Principles were considered to be just enough to satisfy the conditions of entry. The Report of the Committee on Commonwealth Membership (2007, p. vi) found in favour of what they referred to as cautious expansion and the official position of the Commonwealth was therefore that Rwanda could come in, providing no compromise was made on the fundamental values enshrined in the Harare Principles.

The arguments for and against Rwanda joining the Commonwealth mirror a divide which runs through much of the academic literature on post-genocide Rwanda. Filip Reyntjens (2013, p. xiii) highlights this divide when he observes that there are, ‘two radically opposed perceptions of Rwanda.’ The first of these perceptions focuses on progress in education, health, women’s empowerment, agriculture, and the economy. For Reyntjens (2013, p. xiii), this view of progress, with an emphasis on the positive side of reconstruction since the genocide, is held largely by those he labels ‘friends of the new Rwanda.’ These ‘friends’ include aid agencies and former political leaders, who share a view, first put forward by Bill Clinton, that Rwanda is a ‘strong, unified and growing nation with the potential to become a model for the rest of Africa and the World’ (Clinton cited in Reyntjens, 2013, p. xv).

Clinton’s claims have been echoed by a number of observers who agree that the Rwandan government has achieved great things, particularly in the field of bureaucratic governance (Chemouni, 2016; Jones, 2018). In the area of female representation, for example, it is frequently acknowledged that Rwanda occupies one of the highest rankings of countries in the world with the most women in parliament (UN Women, 2017). Patricia Crisafulli and Andrea Redmond (2012) are among such observers who have written positively about progress in Rwanda. As they see it, a new narrative is unfolding, ‘one of self-determination and increasing self-reliance, and of a country in a hurry to get where it wants and needs to be’ (Crisafulli and Redmond, 2012, p. 3). Observers generally agree that the Rwandan government has successfully implemented a policy of economic development and modernisation, but for many this progress is flawed.

Where those on the opposite side of Reyntjens’ dichotomisation of the literature part company with the ‘friends’ of Rwanda, outlined above, is in their criticism that economic development and modernisation in Rwanda has come at the expense of human rights, instability, and possible future conflict (Front Line, 2005; Hintjens, 2006; Human Rights Watch, 2005). Much of this criticism is centred around what Scott Strauss and Lars Waldorf (2011, p. 4) point out are a ‘series of dramatic political, economic, and social projects’ undertaken by the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF). These include ‘forced villagisation, a de facto ban on ethnic identity, re-education of the population, and the systemic redrawing and renaming of Rwanda’s territory’ (Straus and Waldorf, 2011, p. 4; see also Rafti, 2004). All of these projects, critics argue, might, on the surface, make Rwanda appear stable, but are based on a short-term goal of keeping the RPF government in power, which may be detrimental to long-term peace (Reyntjens, 2013). Omar McDoom (2011, p. 6) sums this up when he notes, ‘post-conflict stability premised on economic growth and strong leadership - but without political liberalisation in the longer term - may have a finite duration and a possibly dramatic ending.’

My aim here is not to offer a comprehensive account of the secondary literature on unity, progress and peace in Rwanda, which is beyond the scope of this article, but rather to indicate the ways in which the international community is divided in its critique. Yet in noting these divisions, it is vital to point out the reality that notwithstanding the economic and political progress that has been made in Rwanda, changes in the law around identity and ethnicity, which are said to promote unity and peace, mean that anyone seen to be potentially upsetting the so-called ‘unity’ runs the risk of being accused of divisionism (Jones, 2005); even those, as Helen Hintjens (2008, p. 10) points out, ‘who simply show that not everyone is benefitting equally from Rwanda’s economic and political progress.’ The discussion here is particularly apposite in so far as my earlier comments regarding interviewees are concerned because, although I tried to ensure that those I interviewed were from a range of backgrounds and professions - academia, civil society, politics, in terms of balance of opinion, however, the interviewees, media sources, and reports I consulted all seemed to point in a similar direction to a standardised view of how the Rwandan government believed things ought to be (Hintjens, 2008; Jones, 2005; Thomson, 2013). While this invariably gives the sample a bias, my findings are nonetheless valuable and instructive given the lack of attention in the Commonwealth literature to Rwanda since joining the organisation in 2009. To militate against the shaping of any overgeneralised conclusions based on my limited number of interviews, however, I have attempted, throughout the article, to place my findings in a discussion of the wider literature on Rwanda. Over the following two sections, I attempt to construct a picture of how Rwanda and the Commonwealth have both received each other.

**The Commonwealth effect on Rwanda**

The first thing to point out when attempting to discuss the Commonwealth effect on Rwanda is that Rwanda’s decision to join the Commonwealth was made at the highest governmental level, without discussion or debate. As a result, most ordinary Rwandans have very little knowledge of what the Commonwealth is, what it does, or that, since 2009, they have belonged to its family. Nevertheless, it is possible to discern at least three ways that Commonwealth membership has had an effect, either directly or indirectly, on Rwanda; even if these are not immediately apparent to ordinary Rwandans, or to the casual observer. All three contain elements that came up over and again, in discussions with interviewees and in the Rwandan media, around the question of whether, or how, Commonwealth membership had made a difference to Rwandan lives. Though later sub-sections of the article will flesh out the elements sketched here, I want, briefly, to suggest the contours of each, in order to provide some background for the discussion that follows.

First, as interviewees saw it, the Commonwealth has brought opportunities for Rwandans to develop their English language skills. In 2008, English replaced French as the official second language in Rwanda. The Rwandan government claims that because English is the language of science and commerce, the switch to English will bring prosperity and contribute to national reconciliation by improving the living standards of Rwandans (Samuelson and Freedman, 2010, p.192). As the argument goes, English, not French, is the language of progress, of technocratic development, a way to propel the Rwandan state into the future. French, by contrast, was the language of colonial repression. One interviewee captured this contrast clearly when he told me:

on one side, we see a power that invests in the people, and that is the British…who can cooperate with us. On the other hand, we have someone who is always a master. And this idea is even in the language,... you find a lot of words…colonial attitudes in French that we don’t see in English (Rwandan academic, personal communication, January 21, 2015).

While Rwanda’s application for Commonwealth membership appears to have no direct connection to the switch to English as the official second language, joining the Commonwealth has nevertheless brought the British Council, which has been working with Rwandan teachers and businesses to help improve language skills. In addition, Commonwealth membership allows Rwandans to apply for scholarships to attend overseas institutions and gain access to higher learning through the Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Plan, which potentially leads to more employment opportunities. There was a sense among my interviewees that if Rwandans are exposed to educational opportunities overseas they will bring back new ideas, ‘learn about other cultures’ and ‘have opportunities to talk to people they would never meet (Rwandan academic, personal communication, February 12, 2015). By joining the Commonwealth, Rwandans now had opportunities to access ideas and cultures on a global scale, thus opening up the previously insular culture to more of a universal, global outlook. With the idea of a more global, cosmopolitan outlook in mind, I particularly wanted to explore how deep this sense of English leading to prosperity went. How far was it rhetorical - a device for the Rwandan government to push their unity agenda? Was there a consciousness that the country was becoming more prosperous? What about those being left behind?

Second, the Commonwealth has opened up new trade and investment opportunities for Rwanda. In 2014, the organisation launched the Commonwealth Enterprise and Investment Council - ‘with a mandate to facilitate increased trade and investment across the Commonwealth…by helping Commonwealth governments attract investment, promote enterprise and improve the business environment’ (Commonwealth Enterprise and Investment Council, 2018). It is impossible to discern any measurable benefits that Commonwealth membership has brought to Rwanda in this area, as the country’s largest trade partners continue to be the neighbouring states of Uganda, Tanzania, Kenya, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (National Institute of Statistics, 2018). This suggests that membership of the EAC has been more beneficial to Rwanda than membership of the Commonwealth. When I discussed this with a civil society operative, he drew on a common theme put forward by the Rwandan government:

After the genocide, Rwanda was a closed community…to them [the RPF] it was very important that we are part of the EAC and the Commonwealth…because we needed them to open windows for our businesses, the education opportunities, but, above all, the investment opportunities because the Commonwealth is connected to the EAC and it’s a big community (Rwandan civil society operative, personal communication, January 23, 2015).

This last point is interesting, it is widely acknowledged in the literature on development that Rwanda views Anglophone states as far more reliable sources for investment and development aid (Hintjens, 2008; Samuelson and Freedman, 2010). But it is equally well known that the Rwandan president uses extraversion tactics to shore up what might be described as one of the most successful development stories in contemporary Africa (see Fisher, 2015). I wanted to explore how far the discussion around the Commonwealth and investment opportunities stretched to aid and development. What was the Rwandan view of this; did they feel that Rwanda had agency?

Finally, the Commonwealth requires member states to abide by its human rights principles. Thus, there is a sense, as I have already pointed out, among some enthusiastic Commonwealth observers, that Commonwealth membership will help Rwanda foster adherence to these principles (see Howell, 2012; Jones, 2014). This is an argument that human rights groups have dismissed as ‘extremely unconvincing’ (Ghai, 2009). Given the extensive report compiled by Ghai for the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative against Rwanda’s accession to the Commonwealth, I wanted to get deeper under the surface of this potentially problematic issue. Were interviewees aware of the Commonwealth’s human rights agenda? Did they think that the Commonwealth could help Rwanda? In what ways did they envisage this could be done?

When I put these questions to one prominent youth leader, he seemed surprised that the answer was not obvious to me. Reflecting on the past two decades of Rwandan history, he pointed out ‘it would be easier to learn the Commonwealth goals, like what they want to achieve in Rwanda, the reason being because Rwanda is starting afresh - like from zero’ (Rwandan youth leader, personal communication, January 15, 2015). This was a powerful image, and yet, what was especially pertinent about my interviewee’s response was that it was not the first time that I had heard it. The fact that Rwanda had to ‘start from zero in 1994’ was a frequent expression used by Paul Kagame and it came up time and again in speeches and in the media (Soudan, 2015; Waugh, 2004). The need to start again, to create a common narrative around the genocide has become so much a part of RPF and ‘official’ Rwandan thinking that it appeared to structure interviewees’ interpretation of many of my questions about the Commonwealth. A strong, common theme that ran through most interviews and news articles was the way in which the Commonwealth was a means by which a flawed state could leave behind its dark history and find a calmer realm in a universal order. This is an idea that resonates with the Commonwealth’s attempt to be a more relevant international organisation ‘animated by adherence to principles of liberalism and democracy’ (Jones, 2014, p. 347). But was Rwanda really, as one interviewee described it, the ‘baby that could hold the Commonwealth family together’? (Rwandan youth leader, January 15, 2015).

***‘Starting from zero’***

Without exception, answers to the question of why Rwanda joined the Commonwealth were delivered by my interviewees in the form of a short lecture on the history of colonialism in Rwanda. This was almost always imbued with resentment towards the French government for what was officially considered to be French involvement in the Rwandan genocide. Since the genocide, as noted in the wider literature on Rwanda, acrimony between France and Rwanda had grown fierce (Mamdani, 2001; Wallis, 2014). Rwanda’s accession to the Commonwealth was described in terms of a new beginning. It was a way in which to escape an abusive family. This was echoed in the media as well as in interviews. As the *Kigali Today* journalist Magnus Mazimpaka (2015) writes, the decision to join the Commonwealth was seen as a way to ‘end the humiliation,’ it provided a means to ‘dislodge the Frenchman and set themselves free from the Francophonie‘children’.’ Mazimpaka’s comment echoed the responses I was given. As most interviewees saw it, by joining the Anglophone group of Commonwealth states, Rwanda could loosen some of the ties to its colonial past. But whether it had managed to completely sever these ties was not always clear to my interviewees.

When questioned as to whether Rwanda was still a member of the Francophonie, interviewees were hazy on the details: ‘We’re here, we’re there. We don’t know where we stand, but one thing we know, we are English…French is taught here as a language, but the first official language is English’ (Rwandan youth leader, personal communication, January 15, 2015). This was a powerful statement, as interviewees described it, despite the uncertainty of whether Rwanda still retained its old ties to the French family, English seemed to have a stabilising effect on identity.

Language also assumed particular importance when asked about the effect Commonwealth membership had had on Rwanda’s economic prosperity. One Rwandan academic attempted to explain this through a Kinyarwandan analogy, as he put this, ‘when faced with a situation where you are forced to choose between having to eat a dog and starving, try to ensure the dog that you eat is white’ (Rwandan academic, personal communication, January 21, 2015). Britain and the Commonwealth were the white dog in this analogy. Put slightly differently, in comparison to the French and the Francophonie, the Commonwealth was the lesser of two evils. As with many examples provided by my interviewees, this was largely the argument of the Rwandan government, who had justified the switch from French to English by flaunting English as the language of globalisation (Hintjens, 2008). As I have already pointed out earlier in this section, for the RPF administration, English brought greater prosperity and an improvement in living standards, both of which contributed to national reconciliation. This seemed to be a much more technical, rational approach to thinking about the introduction of English and its effects on Rwanda but it was also an approach that had an underside, as one potentially tragic consequence of the switch to English has been that a generation of Francophone youth are being left behind.

When I put the question of English, and its links to prosperity, to the French Programme Coordinator of a large INGO that had played a role in developing English curriculum in Rwanda, she described the changes that had taken place over the past few years in her experience of living in and around Kigali. As she put it, ‘when I came to Rwanda, French was a requirement on most job applications, but now that has gone, and most of the well paid jobs are demanding English’ (French INGO programme coordinator, personal communication, February 3, 2015). This meant that many Francophone Rwandans were losing out as these jobs were largely being ‘snapped up by returnees from Tanzania and Uganda’ (French INGO programme coordinator, personal communication, February 3, 2015).

It is worth pausing over these observations, if only to point out that, if, as the RPF saw it, there was (artificially) no such thing as ethnicity in Rwanda, then there did seem to be a growing class divide, and this was once more wrapped up in the idea of language. This was evident in the observations of a German INGO operative who had helped me gain access to local civil society organisations. As she observed, it was ‘fashionable to switch to English if you were in a restaurant with friends and everyone was speaking in Kinyarwandan or French. English showed you had education and money’ (German INGO programme officer, personal communication, January 8, 2015). For all of the RPF’s attempts to create unity around the idea that Rwandans were ‘Rwandan,’ rather than Tutsi, Hutu, or Twa, language appears to have replaced ethnicity as a proxy for identity.

The negative effects of the switch to English on some members of the population is at the extreme end of the story of the Commonwealth effect on Rwanda, but it contains elements that came up over and again in discussions with elites and in my general observations. For most of the Anglophone elites I interviewed this was often mentioned and then glossed over or treated as an educational opportunity. This is evident in one interviewee’s observation that:

...at the beginning it was very hard for so many people who used only French. But, I think, the nation were sensitised and now they see an opportunity - that to know both French and English is an advantage for a citizen, not a problem (Rwandan Trade Unionist, personal communication, January 19, 2015).

The use of the word ‘sensitised’ here is particularly telling, as it draws on, and helps to construct, a particularly idealised picture of the way in which the RPF is attempting to paint a picture of unity and an ideal future. One potential way of creating an ideal future is to get rid of the roots of the old family. For the RPF, these roots were in the French language and in ethnicity, as I pointed out in my review of the literature on progress and unity earlier in the article. The anti-French sentiment in the responses of my interviewees and in the Anglophone media, alongside the observations from the French INGO Programme Officer, aligns with evidence documented in the literature. Those concerned with new linguistic and political divisions, heightened by the increasing dominance of Anglophone Rwandans returning from exile in Uganda, point out that, while seemingly subtle, these differences could potentially have implications for the unity of the Rwandan state (Hintjens, 2001, 2008; Hintjens and Kiwuwa, 2006; Maina Peter and Kibalama, 2006; Rafti, 2004). By joining the Anglophone Commonwealth, then, might one argue that the RPF was effectively deepening these divisions?

***Interests and opportunities***

Broadly, as I pointed out earlier, for many interviewees the Commonwealth brought educational opportunities in the form of Commonwealth scholarships. Common to many interviewee responses, and echoed in the Anglophone Rwandan media, was the underlying notion that this was a way to look to the future and leave the violence of the past behind. This was clearly evident in one youth leader’s observation when he pointed out that, ‘education - it’s very positive, it’s not aggressive, it’s not oppressive. It’s helping people to extend their minds’ (Rwandan youth leader, personal communication, January 21, 2015). Others followed this line of thinking, pointing out that the Commonwealth, and the British Council, were going to ‘educate Rwandans for the future’ (Rwandan academic, personal communication, February 12, 2015). When I tentatively suggested that French was considered a cosmopolitan language also, the interviewee disagreed, for Rwandans, he informed me, the Francophonie, with its sole focus on preserving French language and culture, had left them ‘ignorant in the past’ (Rwandan academic, personal communication, February 12, 2015). Perhaps this was one of the reasons why none of the interviewees, nor others I spoke to in Rwanda, mentioned that the Francophonie gives out similar scholarships to support the further education opportunities of citizens of former French colonies (see Agence Universitaire de la Francophonie, 2018).

Rwanda offers a picture of a contradictory process that might be seen as simply giving way to the dominance of one colonial family over another. Yet, there is a sense that, since the genocide, and since shaking off the influence of the French in Rwandan culture, what had once been understood as manipulation and interference from the West, was now handled on Rwandan terms. One particularly noteworthy observation that helps give credence to this claim, was a media frenzy, in the week I arrived in Kigali, around a report that the Belgian government was thought to be scrapping a grant of approximately $50 million in aid to Rwanda. As the media reported, the Belgians were unhappy with what the Belgian embassy in Kigali had supposedly described as Rwanda’s ‘failure to meet media freedom and governance targets’ (Uwiringiyimana, 2014). In response to this accusation, the Rwandan Foreign Minister Louise Mushikiwabo was reported in *The New Times* (Musoni, 2014) to have noted:

Belgium has every right to determine whether, when and how to disburse its aid money and that the decision solely fell within Belgium’s sovereign rights and had nothing to do with how Rwanda relates with the former.

As I arrived in Kigali, the story was winding down. In response to the Rwandan Foreign Minister’s suggestion that Belgium could do what it wanted with its aid, the Belgian government appeared to change tack noting that they had not suspended but merely ‘postponed’ the payment ‘to allow Kigali to make progress in different fields’ (Musoni, 2014).

There was a feeling here that, when juxtaposed with its past memberships and relationships, Rwanda was now in control of its own destiny, but equally noteworthy in this respect is the point I made earlier that Kagame is adept at using extraversion strategies to shore up western aid. Writing on Kagame’s skill in this area, observers from Human Rights Watch (2005) have pointed to similar incidences where the Rwandan President has taken Western diplomats to task and walked away with a better deal; they note: ‘Burdened by guilt over their inaction during the genocide...they generously support the Rwandan government...while ordinarily overlooking its human rights abuses.’ While Rwanda’s accession to the Commonwealth came four years after this observation by Human Rights Watch, the literature on Rwanda highlights a continuing practice (see Fisher, 2015). This observation brings to mind the claims that Commonwealth membership would help Rwanda in the area of human rights. Was this claim on a par with the critique levelled at Kagame’s empty rhetoric on human rights and democracy?

***Shared values***

While interests and opportunities were clearly important for the still fragile state, as many interviewees saw it, shared values were too. Rwandans I spoke to were attracted to what they called the ‘moral authority’ of the Commonwealth (Rwandan youth leader, personal communication, January 15, 2015). This was echoed by some media sources in the lead up to Rwanda’s accession to the Commonwealth. As one *New Times* journalist put it, the Commonwealth ‘may have emerged as a reminder or representation of British imperialism but can now be harnessed for the benefit of all its members’ (Kagabo, 2007). This stood in stark contrast to the neo-colonial rhetoric espoused by Robert Mugabe and Yahya Jammeh, as they withdrew their states from the Commonwealth. The more savvy Rwandans I spoke to were aware of the Zimbabwe situation and used this as a tool with which to juxtapose Rwanda. In reaction to Zimbabwe’s withdrawal from the Commonwealth, one interviewee noted, ‘If you realise something is wrong, you don’t solve it from without, you solve it from within’ (Rwandan youth leader, personal communication, January 15, 2015). What is especially pertinent about this observation, and similar others, is that many interviewees failed to realise that, in dealing with its own problems with the francophone family that it was trying to leave behind, Rwanda had not attempted to solve the problems ‘from within,’ but had withdrawn from the family and was continuing to take measures, which included the alienation of some of its own French speaking citizens, to maintain something of a distance. In this respect, interviewees failed to see the similarity with the Zimbabwe situation and picked up instead on Zimbabwe’s problems with human rights.

This discussion of human rights issues in the Commonwealth points to the ways in which Rwanda’s accession to the Commonwealth can both challenge the Commonwealth’s attempt to be a relevant international organisation fostering principles of liberalism and democracy and reify it. A powerful image of this reification filtered through when interviewees talked about the Commonwealth in the language of family. As one academic pointed out, ‘You find that in the Commonwealth, this idea of family-ship. You want people to be together, you want people to live in harmony’ (Rwandan academic, personal communication, January 21, 2015). Harmony was a recurring theme. Reflecting on the Commonwealth family in its entirety, a youth leader drew on a similar theme, for him the Anglophone grouping represented:

A group of people irrespective of their different backgrounds, irrespective of different cultures, aspiring to the same goals - free and fair, a free community, a healthy community, a democratic community, a human rights respecting community, a peaceful community, that’s what I see (Rwandan youth leader, personal communication, January 15, 2015).

For these Rwandans, who had a recent history entwined in a family that was far from harmonious, the Commonwealth presented an opportunity to leave behind the thick, messy, nastiness of family, and inhabit a much thinner space as the newest member, with no roots attached, of an organisation which was striving to be cosmopolitan.

This understanding of the different ways in which becoming a member of the Commonwealth has affected Rwanda gives us something in the way of an understanding of how the Commonwealth might tentatively build a case for its continued relevance around the accession of Rwanda. But the discussion presented so far only tells half the story. What about the other half? Having set out and elaborated on three possible ways in which Commonwealth membership has had an effect on Rwanda, I now want to reverse the direction of the argument and explore the extent to which Rwanda’s membership has affected the Commonwealth.

**Rwanda’s effect on the Commonwealth**

Up until this point, interviewees largely confirmed the view put forward in the Rwandan media and by Kagame that membership had been a positive experience for Rwanda (Kagame cited in Commonwealth Secretariat, 2017), but what did they think Rwanda brought to the Commonwealth? Did they believe that Rwanda’s Commonwealth membership made a difference to other Commonwealth members? Did they see the Rwanda’s experience as a positive model for other states to follow?

There were two main approaches to the way that interviewees answered these questions. The first was an uncomplicated view of the practical side of Rwanda’s conflict management skills. The second approach was a much more idealised way of describing how Rwanda could contribute to helping the Commonwealth to realise its cosmopolitan goals.

In this section, I want to describe the ways in which this idealisation manifests in the ways in which interviewees see Rwanda’s role in the Commonwealth going forward. The Rwandan government rhetoric, and policy on unity, lend themselves well to this idealisation, but I also got the sense that this was something that interviewees, in their various roles as youth leaders, trade unionists, civil society representatives, were proud of doing themselves. This bestowed a sense of agency to Rwandans: with Rwanda’s help, things could be improved for everyone. The youth leaders I spoke to, both in official interviews and in everyday conversation, were clear in their vision of sharing the lessons of the Rwandan genocide with others. Rwanda’s membership in the East African Community and the Commonwealth was helping to facilitate this. As one interviewee put it, ‘Rwandans have a story to tell about what happens when people choose divisions’ (Rwandan human rights NGO operative, personal communication, January 23, 2015). One youth leader - who had been working directly with Commonwealth youth initiatives as one of the ‘Queen’s Young Leaders’ - was clear about the ways in which Rwanda’s membership in the Commonwealth would make a difference to the organisation:

Our interests in the Commonwealth are different from other countries...Most of them are: ‘I, I, I, I, I want this,’ and here in Rwanda it’s all about ‘we, we, we, we,’ because we are chasing a common vision (Rwandan youth leader, personal communication, January 15, 2015).

There is a sense here that Rwandans are searching for something in the way of a ‘we-feeling,’ where there is less of a feeling of selfishness, and more of an understanding how hard-line communitarianism can get out of control, and how to prevent this from happening. Rwanda was a success story, but whatever lay behind the official government rhetoric, whatever draconian measures the Rwandan government had taken to unite the country, and however much other Commonwealth heads of state had ignored on-going issues of human rights protection to allow the accession of Rwanda, interviewees seemed to look beyond this to a more universal reparation which would lead to something better for everyone, not only Rwandans. This was a familiar theme in most interviews, a concern for the ‘moral equality’ of all human beings: ‘states have a moral obligation to help their neighbours.

This idealisation feeds into the way in which the Commonwealth has seen its role in the world since the end of the Cold War (Mayall, 2010). But there is a difference between the way my interviewees describe this, and the way in which Secretary-Generals and some British politicians talk about the Commonwealth. From the Secretariat, over the years, has come highly idealised descriptions of what the Commonwealth is capable of, tethered to utopian dreams of making the organisation strong again (see Ramphal, 1997). For my interviewees, echoing Kagame, rhetoric is accompanied by more practical solutions to Commonwealth problems. This is at its most graphic when it evokes the powerful image of what Rwandans have been through, how the dark forces of nationalism and particularism destroyed their sense of humanity, how Rwandans have learned to repair themselves, and how they want to share these ideas and experiences with others.

For interviewees, this sense of reparation went in two directions, ‘what we want to do is to share Rwandan experience, but also to listen to the Kenyans…So Rwanda brings preventative measures but it also brings the spirit of resilience’ (Rwandan civil society operative, personal communication, January 23, 2015). Most interviewees linked this multidirectional reparation to their Commonwealth neighbours in Africa, and the problems that spilled across borders, such as Ebola, terrorism, and civil war. As one interviewee put it, ‘Boko Haram…it’s a tragedy that is yet to erupt, but what such things do, they divide nations. If they are rooted, they divide nations and then people rise up against each other. So, I think, that is something people can learn from Rwanda’ (Rwandan human rights NGO operative, personal communication, January 23, 2015). Behind this reasoning lay the experience of what could happen if these things *did* become ‘rooted.’ When I raised the issue of controversy surrounding Rwanda’s supposed ‘meddling’ in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), the answer always came quickly, Rwanda had a moral obligation to be in the DRC, it was simply helping its neighbours: ‘You don’t have to go very far, you just need to first help solve the problems of those around you…At the end of the day, caring for neighbours in the Commonwealth will actually make it stronger’ (Rwandan civil society operative, personal communication, January 23, 2015).

These arguments resonate somewhat with the Commonwealth idea that it is a family, and families take care of each other as well as their neighbours. This is an idea that has been championed by Commonwealth Secretary Generals appearing most prominently in the speeches and writing of Shridath Ramphal who pointed out that although Zimbabwe was no longer a member of the Commonwealth, the organisation nevertheless had an on-going responsibility to the Zimbabwean people (Ramphal cited in Moyo and Ashurst, 2007, p. 163). But, while the language of family did appear in interviews in Rwanda, and further, continues to appear in communications from Kagame himself (see Karitanyi and Lomas, 2018), what comes through from these sources is less of a sense of family and more of a sense of egalitarianism among members of an organisation sharing values, opportunities, and give and take. The way in which Kagame, the Anglophone media, and my elite interviewees believed that this was something Rwanda could share with the rest of the Commonwealth was interesting, but was this really something Rwanda could transfer to other members of the Commonwealth, particularly when, as I pointed out earlier in the paper, that those observers most critical of Rwanda’s progress have observed that progress in the areas of democracy and human rights is in name only?

**Conclusions: Still relevant?**

In this article, I have been discussing the effect of Rwanda’s membership on the Commonwealth, as well as the effect of the Commonwealth on Rwanda, but as highlighted in the wider literature on Rwanda, the newest member of the Commonwealth is still a very violent state, where the government, through the aid of draconian measures that have attempted to redefine Rwandan identity and curtail freedom of speech, has tight control of what people are allowed to say, do, and think. Since the genocide ended, the RPF have been accused of a long list of human rights violations and intimidation tactics which include: mass killings, uprooting the rural poor, the arbitrary arrest of journalists, the attempt to discredit International Criminal Tribunal judges, and the intimidation of aid agencies (Bellamy, 2012, p. 345). The story of Rwanda’s accession to the Commonwealth is set against the backdrop of this government repression. Although justified to a large extent as being necessary to improve Rwandan ties with the East African Community, the decision to apply for Commonwealth membership has been interpreted by some observers as a castigation that is connected to France’s role in the 1994 genocide (Kroslak, 2007).

The turn to English as the official second language of Rwanda plays a large role in this. Kagame and many of Rwanda’s highest ranking politicians are returnees from exile in neighbouring Anglophone states - particularly Uganda - and have largely succeeded in pushing out any Francophone influence, which they see as being connected to the French government. But the switch to English has also had a detrimental effect on the education and employment opportunities of many Francophone Rwandans, as I discussed. None of the aforementioned intimidation tactics or human rights violations suggest that Rwanda could be the poster-child for an international organisation’s attempts to stay relevant. Where, then, does this get us as far as the main point of the article, which has been to paint a picture of how Rwandans see the Commonwealth and the effect that membership has had on the troubled state?

I have suggested that there are ways in which both Rwanda and the Commonwealth have been mutually beneficial to each other. Rwanda has opened up the Commonwealth to more inclusivity and diversity, has brought with it expertise on conflict resolution, and, as far as its UN ranking as state with the most female representatives in parliament goes, in some respects might be said to be an exemplar state for gender equality, although others disagree on the extent of equality afforded to non-elite Rwandan women (Gatebuke and Epstein, 2017). Conversely, the Commonwealth has provided Rwanda with access to a wider economic community through which it can boost its economy and the wellbeing of Rwandans, as well as bringing Rwanda more in line with its fellow East African Community member states. Additionally, Rwandans can now benefit from access to Commonwealth educational scholarships; although, nothing here suggests that these are particularly or exclusively cosmopolitan endeavours. But is this enough to claim that Rwanda as an ideal model to help prove that the Commonwealth is a relevant organisation driven by the cosmopolitan principles of liberalism and democracy? If the criteria for cosmopolitan exemplar were simply expansion and inclusivity, then the answer would be yes. But it would be simplistic to suggest that inclusivity and acceptance of the ‘Other’ were the only cosmopolitan criteria under investigation. What about human rights, democracy, and the rule of law?

Having weighed up my interviewee testimony alongside the actions of the Rwandan state, it is not clear, in practical terms, how Rwanda could ever be an exemplar for the Commonwealth’s attempts to prove its relevance as an organisation with cosmopolitan principles. My conclusion then is that, *theoretically*, as a blank canvas on which to build a cleaner platform for cosmopolitanism, without the family baggage that accompanies other Commonwealth Anglophone states, Rwanda, for many of the Commonwealth’s keenest observers, was an exemplary choice, which brought with it concrete lessons about the dark side of human nature. However, on a more practical scale, it is difficult to reconcile the idea that Rwanda is an exemplary model of equality, universality, and egalitarianism when the Rwandan government is exercising what we might call anti-cosmopolitan tactics against its own population.

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