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The Legacy of Alexis Kagame

Responses to Conceptions of Colonisation and Evangelisation in Rwanda

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Among the Rwandan authors of the colonial and post-colonial periods, one author, Alexis Kagame (1912–1981), seems to stand out as central, even essential. His name represents the entire history of a scientific, literary, and cultural movement in Rwanda since the Belgian colonial period when he became a priest and was thus subjected to the norms and rules of the Belgian clergy.

In Europe, streets often bear the names of great personalities. This living archive is inscribed throughout cities and districts as a testimony of the legacy for the inhabitants whose conception of history is mediated through great artists, politicians, and writers. The identity of the place is merged with the actions of men and women who have marked their history, as Matthew Stanard has shown in a book on colonial memory. Likewise, it is inconceivable to think or speak of Rwanda without speaking of Alexis Kagame. Even so, no building, neighbourhood or street has been named after him despite the central place he occupies in our understanding of his native country, not only in Rwanda but also Africa as a whole and Belgium.

The present chapter intends to look back at this complex, hard-to-pin-down character and to analyse his response to the colonial enterprise through his intellectual production. This provides an opportunity for us to better understand the Belgian colonial ideology (1916–62) in Rwanda as well as the political and cultural shifts that occurred during the post-colonial era to the present day, a period fundamentally reshaped by the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi.

What does the immense work of this author, who grew up and worked while Rwanda was under Belgian rule, a system which purported the inability of the colonised to either think for themselves or govern themselves, signify for us today? How did he react against this colonial framework that sought to overturn ancient habits and customs, introduce new practices designed to establish a modern administration, and teach a new wisdom substantiated by the Christian religion? What strategies did he adopt to counter this situation?
Alexis Kagame’s response to the Belgian colonial system will be divided into three parts, including the revalorisation of Rwanda’s cultural models by reappropriation of cultural riches obscured or poorly explained by Europeans, and the examination of some of Kagame’s little-known works on Rwandan culture produced to alleviate the shocks and sudden changes engendered by colonialism. But first, it is essential to broach the context in which this author emerged.

**Alexis Kagame’s Era and the Birth of His Consciousness**

The arrival of the colonisers and missionaries in Rwanda brought about many changes on different levels and their respective actions were consistently complementary. It was in a rapidly changing society that young Kagame evolved and worked. Catholic missionaries taught him how to read and write before entering the minor seminary in 1928, then the major seminary of Kabgayi in 1933. During this period, the evangelising mission, which had begun under the German colonisation in the years 1887–1915, continued successfully in the Belgian period. These two opposing forces continued to infuse changes that were to lead, as Kagame observes in a eulogy to this new modernity, to profound ‘economic, social, political and artistic changes’.

Father de Decker, rector of the major seminary, who had noticed this societal transformation and cultural revolution, oriented the studies of the seminarians towards research on the traditional riches of Rwanda. Every year, he organised cultural evenings during which the seminarians presented the fruits of their investigations before the guest of honour, the king of Rwanda, Mutara III Rudahigwa. During one of these events, Alexis Kagame recited poems so eloquently that the king was impressed by this young man unknown by the aristocrats and the families of the royal court poets. He summoned him and asked him where the poems came from; Kagame replied that he had learned them from Sekarama, and hearing this, Mutara III Rudahigwa promised to send him more and better ones. Henceforth, his research career began with the collection and study of the oral heritage of Rwandan culture and history: ‘stories, tales, panegyric texts and genealogical stories of dynastic poetry’. From then onwards, the bards continued to come in droves, but he ‘became the first Rwandan intellectual, without doubt the first and the last, to have (direct) access to the source of Rwanda’s history […] and to be graciously served by those who were the living reservoirs of this source’.

It is in this context that the young Alexis Kagame, supported by the Rwandan monarchy, the Catholic Church, and anthropologists who were often the missionaries themselves, found a role to play in the history of Rwanda. He
acquired and was fascinated by Rwandan oral traditions while, at the same
time, he received training from the missionaries, which allowed him to discover
European civilisation: its history, philosophy, religion, technology, the arts, the
conquest of the world and space. This discovery created in him an incredible
awareness as well as intellectual and artistic ferment:

My first step was learning to write; then, I learned the French language
through which I encountered French culture. Knowing their culture has
helped me better understand mine. [...] Once I understood their culture, I
realized that mine had to hold its own against theirs.12

Kagame was amazed to discover that one truly understands one’s own culture
when compared to another’s, in this case, the coloniser’s. The comparison was a
dangerous exercise because, in the comparative logic of the 1920s–30s – a period
dominated by the Hamitic ideology13 – some cultures regarded themselves as
more advanced than others. Nonetheless, the comparison generated a will to
define Rwandan identity, to resist and to refuse to be taken for a jigsaw puzzle
with pieces waiting to be created and arranged by outsiders. This resistance was
not to be relished by the Belgian colonialists (such as Jean-Paul Harroy
who consequently labelled Kagame a dangerous nationalist.14

Fortunately, the above-mentioned comparison became the source of a mul-
tidimensional work and a coherent architecture founded in Kinyarwanda, Kag-
ame’s first language. Thus, he took Kinyarwanda as a starting point to deduce
the existence of a history, a culture, and a Rwandan Bantu philosophy. The
Belgian colonial system used Kinyarwanda neither in the administration nor
in education because the new school system favoured the coloniser’s language:

[T]his new language, taught in schools, is understood by less than 4% of the
population [...]. French is the language of prestige and social advancement;
and it is used in the so-called higher functions, while Kinyarwanda remains,
at the national level, the language of social communication.15

Kinyarwanda and French divided the national life into two domains, thus
establishing a certain diglossia: Kinyarwanda being the language of the domes-
tic and intimate sphere while French was the language of the administration,
the outside world, and ostentatiousness.

Against this hierarchy of languages, cultures, and men, Kagame advocated the
dismantlement of this colonial hegemony by highlighting ignored aspects of his
own heritage and by creating original models adapted to the Rwandans. From 1943
to 1966, he wrote in Kinyarwanda to disseminate the wealth of Rwandan literature
and translated into this minority language to provide it with new lexicons and concepts of modernity. The idea was that Kinyarwanda was able to convey all national life experiences and possessed significant lexical resources in different professions and human relations. Following the dynamics of modernity, his writing provided Kinyarwanda with the possibility to borrow or coin its own terminologies, so much so that in the post-colonial period, Kinyarwanda has become the language of instruction at primary level, while French has maintained its status at secondary and university levels but has now been superseded by English since 2008.

The Valorisation of Rwanda’s Little-Known Cultural Models

Under Belgian colonisation, religious congregations focused primarily on education. With young people, their teachings not only replaced traditional systems of thought with a new religious system but also ensured a certain homogeneity between the colonial school and the metropolitan school. These schools gradually introduced in the school curriculum the results of studies carried out on Rwanda by the Europeans. Alexis Kagame’s work served to fill in the gaps on certain aspects of Rwandan culture explored by previous researchers and missionaries.16 In this process, he published scientific works and revisited pre-existing literary genres.

On Languages

Alexis Kagame’s contribution here consisted in rejecting the idea of the language hierarchy developed by the colonial system and disproving the Eurocentric reading of Kinyarwanda and Kirundi.17 He started with the grammatical description of Kinyarwanda, followed by literary creations and translations, as his ambition was to remove Kinyarwanda from the domination of European languages and put measures in place for it to become a language of instruction.

Initially, Kagame critiqued the linguistic and grammatical studies written for non-Rwandans by Eugène Hurel,18 the French White Father, and André Coupez, the Belgian anthropologist and linguist based at the Tervuren Museum.19 In 1960, Kagame wrote La langue du Rwanda et du Burundi expliquée aux autochtones [The Language of Rwanda and Burundi Explained to the Natives] and offered seventy-eight lessons on Kinyarwanda and Kirundi.20 From within the language, he made an anatomical description of the language they – the natives – speak without prior knowledge of the grammatical structures.21

The description and knowledge of this language enabled him to correct errors related to a poor understanding of Kinyarwanda and Kirundi grammatical rules proposed by Hurel, in particular. For Kagame, these past studies
focused on the systematisation and arrangement of linguistic materials by following categories of the European languages despite the differences in structure between these languages and the Bantu language.\textsuperscript{22} From a perspective that is both descriptive and pedagogical, he responded to statements such as: ‘there are no articles in Kinyarwanda and Kirundi’, ‘the search for the past participle in Kinyarwanda and Kirundi according to the French model’, ‘the identification of the relative pronoun in Kinyarwanda outside the verbal framework’, and ‘the poverty of Bantu languages in qualifying adjectives’.\textsuperscript{23} Kagame’s work evokes that of Moussa Travélé, the Malian linguist who also carried out research on his own language during the colonial period. Both were opposed to the approach adopted by European linguists who explained Afrophone languages via categories operating in the language of the other.\textsuperscript{24}

Furthermore, Kagame proposed to reformulate the structure of the word in Kinyarwanda,\textsuperscript{25} and this structure is still acknowledged by linguists today.\textsuperscript{26} Others like André Coupez opted for a deletion of the roots’ prefixed elements or for the omission of the classifier preceding the root designating, among others, Bantu languages and nationalities. Yet these are the unique elements that indicate, with some degree of precision, the meaning of the word’s root in Kinyarwanda. The omission of these elements is illustrated by the title of Coupez’s book, \textit{Grammaire Rwanda simplifiée} [Simplified Rwanda Grammar].\textsuperscript{27} This should have been Ki-nya-rwanda Grammar. For Kagame, this is the result of the colonialist contempt for other countries, including Rwanda and Burundi:

\textbf{What would happen if I allowed myself to write or say: Belgium Army? England Fleet? France citizens? Germany industry? […] Don’t you believe, that an independent country has the right to the same treatment, in this respect, as the European nations, especially when this country is clearly resistant to the form persistently imposed by the unrepentant colonialists? Hutu, Tutsi and Twa, nor Rundi for that matter, nor Shi, nor Hunde, nor Luba, […] I will make up my mind only when you would have written Gium, Rance, Many for Belgium, France and Germany. As long as these bizarre forms are presented to you, as they are elsewhere too – my demand for respect of the African denominations will never cease.}\textsuperscript{28}

Omitting the classifier or the prefixed elements to the radical stems is a perpetual cultural or epistemological violence given that the identity cards established by the Belgian Tutelage in the 1930s transcribed the ethnic references by the words \textit{Hutu, Tutsi} and \textit{Twa}, instead of ‘Umuhutu, Umututsi and Umutwa’. Hence, the nature of the written term can only be guessed through the context. This official transcription of word, from their roots and by omitting the ini-
tial vowel and the classifier (\textit{u-mu}) is taken up blindly in expressions such as ‘the genocide of the Tutsi’ or the ‘Revolution of the Hutu’, for ‘genocide of the Batutsi’ and the ‘Bahutu Revolution’. Even though Kagame’s work is remarkable from this viewpoint, this quest for liberation has partially failed, since the terms 	extit{Hutu}, 	extit{Twa}, and 	extit{Tutsi} have prevailed.

Finally, Alexis Kagame refuted studies presenting the alleged poverty of African languages, routinely described by Westerns as languages poor in qualifying adjectives, or incomplete languages having neither the verb ‘to be’, nor abstract terms, and future markers. In response to this ignorance, it is through writing that Kagame would deploy his efforts in extremely varied fields to highlight the riches of Kinyarwanda, a language with little writing during the colonial era. Writing and translating scientific and literary texts in Kinyarwanda was to lay the basis for future linguistic majority status. Translating also puts Kinyarwanda and French on the same footing.

His efforts were rewarded after Rwanda obtained independence and he saw the change of status of Kinyarwanda shift from a minority language in education during the colonial era to that of official language. More recently, in August 2017, the translation into Kinyarwanda of \textit{Petit pays} by Gaël Faye (see Hannah Grayson’s chapter in this volume) was the strategy adopted to communicate literary news from France in a language spoken by the majority of Rwandans but insufficiently represented in writing. If Kinyarwanda has become a written literary language, it is undoubtedly because of Alexis Kagame’s intuition.

Without having received formal linguistic training, Kagame attempted, with nuance, to dialogue with European linguists. The latter contributed to ‘the fetishization of African languages, a process, which, in turn, led Africans to de-fetishize them’. Beyond the linguistic description, the use of Kinyarwanda as a scientific and literary tool participated in the deconstruction of the Belgian colonial conception of hierarchising languages of the colonised countries. This operation was achieved through translation and the restoration of Kinyarwanda as a language of science and creation. Thus, he refuted the idea that there are complete languages (imperial) and incomplete languages (primitive). For Kagame, these African languages are not neutral; they are, on the contrary, bearers of history and philosophy.

On History

Before 1900, Rwanda was a non-literate society, and its history was written by missionaries using information collected from traditional informants. In addition to the work done by the missionaries, Alexis Kagame greatly contributed to making the kingdom of Rwanda, its inhabitants, its different institutions and
customs better known. He specialised in the analysis of the cultural heritage transmitted by the monarchy and the valorisation of the precolonial Rwanda oral literature that he himself had transcribed, with the authorisation of King Mutara III Rudahigwa. He first decided to write Inganji Kalinga35 [Kalinga the Victorious36], the history of Rwanda in Kinyarwanda from the mythical origins of this country to historical times. The introduction to this book sets the tone and purpose for his work in history:

This book will remind us of what we are! Before adopting what comes from the West, let’s first know our own achievements and what we add to it! It will remind us that we are not wanderers that God has carelessly thrown into nature. It will show us that Rwanda is a country with roots and a long history. It will show us that we have ancestors who created this country for us and who forged the culture they bequeathed to us! In short, it calls out to us: ‘Look at the achievements of your ancestors! They created Rwanda and made it bigger! And now there is peace: There are no more wars for its expansion! But if you do not deny your ancestors, bring your stone to the completion of its construction; try to enrich it in spirit!37

While reflecting the author’s revolt, this extract is in fact intended for his compatriots trained in missionary schools, suffering from an inferiority complex, and more attracted by European civilisation. Kagame’s goal was to

[e]ducate Rwandans about the values of their country, warn Rwandans against mistakes, call on Rwandans to develop their country, to complete the action of the ancestors, to be the worthy descendants of these brilliant ancestors and lead Rwanda towards the optimal and global fulfilment.38

Kagame’s vision of history is progressive. In this context, progressiveness signifies the ability to draw on the benefits of Western and African cultures, in other words, to combine Rwandan values and what was regarded as the positive contributions of the Belgian colonisers. Although he insisted that Rwanda had a valid culture and robust institutions, his first books were published in French.39 He then wrote the epics inspired by traditional poetry and historical narratives in the three volumes of Isoko y’amajyambere [The Source of Progress]40 published successively in 1949, 1950, and 1951.

The first two volumes of this epic describe the actions taken by each of the mythical and historical kings in their mission to contribute to the glory of the monarch. They detail their political projects aimed at putting the well-being of the Rwandan population at the forefront. Apart from certain monarchs, the major-
ity achieved their mission thanks to their military, administrative, political, and diplomatic qualities. These two volumes seem to mean ‘they have not carefully thought this out. Those who have dared to imagine that there could be a People without a history, without a Civilisation. […] have confused civilisation itself with one of its elements: technical advancement?’\footnote{238} The last volume only highlights positive contributions of colonisation in its missionary form. The action carried out by Bishop Léon Classe as a civilising hero is hailed in the same way as that of the Rwandan kings: he carries within himself the same royal qualities in the sense that he advances Rwanda towards a technical and spiritual development by building schools and setting up training centres, health centres, and churches.

However, although praised by Kagame, Léon Classe was far the embodiment of perfection, especially because of his decisive role in dealing with the ethnic problem of Rwanda. Critics agree that the French prelate reinforced the idea that there is the noble Tutsi and the commoner Hutu and that power is one of the factors of ethnic categorisation. Mahmood Mamdani contends that

\[\text{[f]}\]or Father Léon Classe, the future bishop of Rwanda and the key architect of missionary policy, the Tutsi were already in 1902 ‘superb humans’ combining traits both Aryan and Semitic, just as for Father François Ménard, writing in 1917, a Tutsi was ‘a European under a black skin.’ If the Church heralded the Tutsi as ‘supreme humans’ in 1902, the same Church would turn into a prime site for the slaughter of Tutsi in 1994. The colonial state called upon missionary knowledge from early on. Soon after colonization, the Belgian state ordered a reflection on Rwanda from the White Fathers. The purpose was to elaborate and implement “race policies.” In response, Fathers Arnoux, Hurel, Pagès, and Schumacher – Church fathers with expertise – prepared anthropological treatises. A consolidated document was then drawn up by Léon Classe, the head of the Catholic Church in Rwanda, and then presented to government authorities. This 1916 document had a wide readership. Not surprisingly, it gave vent to the kind of race thinking that the Church hierarchy had come to hold as a deeply felt conviction. ‘Race policy’ became such a preoccupation with the colonial power that from 1925 on, annual colonial administration reports included an extensive description of the ‘races’ in a chapter called ‘race policy’.\footnote{239}

Therefore, colonial and missionary literature accredited as a faith dogma the thesis that the Tutsi was of foreign origin and had come to civilise the indigenous Hutu and Twa. From this hypothesis the Tutsi was associated with the Belgian coloniser. In the period leading to independence, the same racist ideology would continue to be adopted by Belgium when it was decided that independence would
be given to the Hutu who, by then, were regarded as the real Rwandans and the martyrs of a system that hitherto had favoured the Tutsi. Jean-Paul Harroy and Guy Logiest would be the main agents in restoring the country to its purported real owners, and the alleged Tutsi colonisers would be driven out of the country.⁴³

Curiously, this dark aspect of Léon Classe’s action was not evoked by Alexis Kagame’s various contributions, and his silence still stirs up controversy. Moreover, since 1961, historical critiques target Kagame’s sources and regard their interpretation as partisan or manipulated by different ideologies expressed by the royal court, Eurocentric figures, and nationalists. While arguing that Kagame was more a politician than a historian,⁴⁴ Jan Vansina, the famous Belgian anthropologist, argued that before Kagame, historians had used only a fraction of the available sources and that his merit had been to explore all the sources capable of shedding light on the history of the country. Consequently, their research diverged on several points.

Other critics agree with Vansina in that history written by Kagame, taught in Rwandan schools, is the history of the reigning dynasty, which overlaps, knowingly or not, with the social history of Rwanda. First, for Ferdinand Nahimana, the history of Rwanda

is therefore lived through the history of the Nyiginya dynasty and its abami [kings]. […] Kagame concealed certain historical realities and even went so far as to deny historical facts to allow the Nyiginya dynasty and its abami [kings] to shine on their own and to be perceived as the sole architects of the history of Rwanda.⁴⁵

Two fundamental reasons can potentially explain this conception of the history of Rwanda. The first reason, little mentioned by historians critical of Kagame, is that his version of history is largely influenced by the history of European kingdoms (before the end of the eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth century), as was the case for other African intellectuals of the same period (like Cheikh Anta Diop). The second reason is that Kagame was probably influenced by the royal court and particularly by the solicitation and confidence of King Mutara III Rudahigwa, who introduced him to the college of official holders of the esoteric code of royalty and whom he asked to make oral texts available to him.

Next, Roger Heremans, a White Father of Belgian origin, doubts the reliability of Ubwiru,⁴⁶ one of Kagame’s sources:

Ubwiru is not objective. He is so linked to royalty that he must have often misrepresented the facts. […] as interpreters of history, the Abiru have distorted the past, either by projecting current situations anachronistically into
the distant past or by interpreting history according to the current ideology of kingship.\(^{47}\)

Finally, in 2011, lecturers, researchers, and historians from the National University of Rwanda collectively rewrote the new version of the *History of Rwanda*.\(^{48}\) The authors of this book comment on the approach adopted by historians before the genocide:

They were motivated by the manipulation and distortions which were at the very heart of propaganda that preceded and accompanied the 1994 genocide. Now, Rwandans want an objective, truthful, extensively research-based, non-biased and serenely recorded history.\(^{49}\)

Indeed, while acknowledging Alexis Kagame’s immense contribution, various contributors to this collective work contend, on the one hand, that he remained subjective in his treatment of oral traditions and tethered to the colonialists’ and missionaries’ theses. For them, Kagame supported the centralising vision of power that fuelled an elitist project, which at times, has led to historical distortion. On the other hand, Kagame’s work adhered to the Hamite/Bantu myth and nineteenth-century evolutionary and diffusionist theories. These critics support Mahmood Mamdani’s view:

It took Belgian rule a little over a decade to translate its vision of a civilizational mission in Rwanda into an institutional imprint. Central to that translation was the Hamitic hypothesis.[…] Belgian power turned Hamitic racial supremacy from an ideology into an institutional fact by making it the basis of changes in political, social, and cultural relations. The institutions underpinning racial ideology were created in the decade from 1927 to 1936. These administrative reforms were comprehensive. Key institutions – starting with education, then state administration, taxation, and finally the Church – were organized (or reorganized, as the case may be) around an active acknowledgment of these identities.\(^{50}\)

Now that the post-colonial period has perpetuated these identity prejudices through education or in political ideologies, the new Rwandan historiography finds itself faced with a duty to find true history, without colonial or nationalist manipulation. The great challenge of the current generations, not itself immune to the consequences of these endured and assimilated deformations, is that of shedding the colonial imprint and succeeding in building a Rwandan history without markers or residues of colonial and racial ideologies.
Kagame’s Little-Known Original Works on Rwandan Culture

In addition to valorising little-known Rwandan cultural practices, Alexis Kagame looked at possible foundations for building a post-colonial Rwanda: first by drawing on the old precolonial institutions whose functioning he describes and then by the creation of epics intended to *kinyarwandiser* [kinyarwandise] evangelisation. These creations and commentaries by Kagame continue to inspire Rwandan society now although they were imagined as responses to the dominant features of Belgian colonialism.

On Political Institutions

Alexis Kagame liked to say ‘I played politics by saying nothing, by simply taking care of the sources that I introduced to Rwanda’.

These sources create a portrait of Rwanda where a social, political, economic, and military order has been prevailing for centuries.

Indeed, *Le Code des institutions politiques du Rwanda pré-colonial* [The Code of Political Institutions in Precolonial Rwanda] et *Les organisations socio-familiales de l'Ancien Rwanda* [Socio-familial Organisations in Ancient Rwanda] dissect the military training, the herds of cattle associated with them, as well as the territorial organisation of precolonial Rwanda. At the time of their publication in the early 1950s, the will for independence was widespread in colonial Africa. One might think that Kagame wished Rwanda to be ready for this event and at the same time hoped that these two books would constitute a working basis for those responsible for the ten-year plan (1951–61). This plan was supposed to generate the country’s new political organisation, which avowedly was to combine elements of Belgian origin with those that had for centuries proven their worth in the traditional system. The ambition was to protect Rwanda from the possible dangers of a misconstrued transition. Once again, starting from the lessons of European history, Kagame sought to show the world and Rwandans in particular their capacity to take charge of themselves and to do so by drawing on truly Rwandan achievements, which were, he suggested, as remarkable as Belgian ones.

The period 1950–1961 coincided with the administrative reconfiguration of Ruanda-Urundi by the Belgian colonial administration. The key architects of this ill-fated process were Vice-Governor Jean-Paul Harroy, Colonel Guy Logiest, and Bishop André Perraudin. Faced with the annihilation of the Rwandan institutions, Kagame used his knowledge to prove that ‘Rwanda is a great kingdom whose institutions had nothing to envy from other monarchies, be they Western: a kingdom in which social and moral sense were very high with intelligent people that only lacked technical knowledge’.
He contended that the cause of Rwanda would be best served by the strengthening of its constitutional monarchy, a monarchy that, in the future, would be treated as favourably as in Belgium. This stance engendered various feelings towards him. On the one hand, the king and other local officials saw him as ‘the convinced defender of their cause occupying a strategic position’, although ‘no document, no testimony confirms that Kagame was assigned by the Royal Court with such a mission, the abbot behaved as if this mission came first’. On the other hand, Kagame reported that his opponents regarded him as a dangerous nationalist.

The 1950s also saw the Hutu elite begin to demand more justice and equality and question the monarchical political system. The Church, headed by Bishop Léon Classe, and the colonial administration, once won over to the cause of the reigning aristocracy, were gradually led to change sides and to lend their support to the new Hutu movement. In 1959, the new republican political regime replaced the monarchical system. The events surrounding this transition from a feudal system to a republican regime resulted in a bloodbath. These troubled and bloody periods, from the revolution to independence, forced a large part of the population, including Alexis Kagame’s family, to go into exile. How did this author, seen as a servant of the powerful, managed to get through these periods when he was identified as the champion of the old ruling class? Could this be attributed to the ‘general respect for his thinking and his scholarly qualities’? Could his work have been rich enough to be used by the political regime dominated by the Hutu? I have just noted that he is a benchmark author, a unifier with the ability to reconcile the past and the present. His work, apart from a few troubling aspects, is still revered. As a result, from primary education to university, school and academic curricula introduce the results of his research into various and varied subjects and courses (history, literature, and philosophy). However, from 1995 to 2011, history lessons were removed from school curricula and were only reintroduced when the *Histoire du Rwanda des origines à la fin du XXème siècle* was completed.

On a political level, post-colonial Rwanda will often draw inspiration from traditional structures whose function has been sufficiently documented by Alexis Kagame, and it uses them to deal with current political events, especially at the civic education level, for reconciliation or justice. Given its absolute neutrality, this work inspires different political actors who use it in various ways. Three examples deserve to be highlighted: that of the militias, the Itorero, and the Gacaca.

The first example concerns the manipulation of the ‘militias’, which have plunged Rwanda into mourning during various political crises. The Rwandan precolonial militias (1963) were required to perform war service or other ser-
vices to be provided to the court. They were not intended only for combat and could form a sort of social army, or ‘A vast corporation with social and economic rights and duties. The respective members of this “Social Army” could be mobilised to defend different causes. Rights and duties were of far greater importance than war obligations’.60

Post-colonial Rwanda saw the revival of the militia phenomenon, especially in the years 1990–94, a period of the implementation of resolutions adopted by the La Baule conference (June 1990) at the Franco-African summit, which imposed political pluralism. With regards to the dissemination of ideologies, all political parties competed in the mobilisation of youths and supervised them in accordance with the model of precolonial militias as to their creation and their denomination.61 However, their missions were hijacked, as the militias were no longer defending a national cause against a foreign country, but targeting their own countrymen. The best-known militias were Interahamwe and Impuzamugambi. They were respectively linked to political parties, the Mouvement révolutionnaire National pour le développement [National Revolutionary Movement for Development] (MRND) and the Coalition pour la Défense de la République et de la Démocratie [Coalition for the Defense of the Republic and Democracy] (CDR), that played an active role in the violence that shook the country from 1992 to 1994.

The militias acted under the manipulation of political leaders whose speeches incited irregular acts of violence and hatred against Tutsi and Hutu political opponents. From April 1994, the militiamen joined forces with the Presidential Guard to track down, arrest, and kill Tutsis and Hutus. In their murderous madness, they were also supported by local leaders, communal police officers, certain members of the army and the gendarmerie as well as simple peasants. The precolonial militia whose original mission was to protect has been abused since the colonial period because the racist principles used in Ruanda-Urundi and in the Belgian Congo have, like a time bomb, exacerbated the hierarchy of ethnic groups and created frustrations.

Next, in traditional Rwanda, young adults learned essential values (generosity, courage, and tolerance) in a traditional school known as Itorero and received civic education.62 Since 2007, the National Commission for Unity and Reconciliation reintroduced Itorero as a civic education programme for students and professionals of all levels. Itorero mainly addresses the themes of the history of Rwanda, the cultural values that can be used for improved coexistence. In this same framework, in 2013, the Ndi Umunyarwanda, or ‘I’m Rwandan’, programme was created to reignite and strengthen the Rwandan spirit and contribute to the ‘national identity’ that Belgian rule had destroyed through the dissemination of ethnic stereotypes and clichés of all kinds.
The third example is Gacaca, which was a traditional legal institution intended to judge neighbourhood disputes only, but which, in its original form, was not employed to adjudicate blood crimes. However, faced with the nature and scale of the massacres of Tutsi, the government encouraged Rwandan researchers and experts to explore the Gacaca solution alongside the classic judicial system and the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda. Subsequently, a law was promulgated to allow the alleged culprits to be brought to justice in September 1996. Across the country Gacaca has been rekindled and has been used to settle genocide disputes by drawing inspiration from the means of conflict management of traditional Rwanda. To strengthen the unity of Rwandans and the reconstruction of the social fabric, the new mission of Gacaca is to reveal the truth about the genocide, to carry out speedy trials, and to eradicate impunity by involving the population in the punishment of those responsible for the crimes.

The sources of these precolonial institutions have constantly inspired the solutions that different generations have brought to the sociopolitical problems of post-colonial Rwanda. Differently appreciated, his status constantly discussed, his commitment variously interpreted, the echo of Kagame’s work is constantly resonating.

On Theology and Evangelisation

In his capacity as priest of the Catholic Church of Rwanda, Alexis Kagame was concerned with the transmission of the Christian message by multiplying initiatives and strategies to envisage the encounter of Rwandan and Christian cultures. Not only did he translate from French into Kinyarwanda a multitude of liturgical texts and the New Testament, but he also put his talent at the service of creating models of evangelisation appropriate to the traditional mentality, which had its own pierres d’attente de la foi [‘stepping stones of the faith’] and which should not be rejected without further examination. Poetry in Kinyarwanda became immediately a constitutive component of his strategy, because his firm conviction was that Christianity transcended cultures and that it can be transmitted to either culture without unnecessarily affecting the cultural elements of the populations concerned. Thus, to inculcate an intelligible Christianity within the reach of Rwandans, he composed in Kinyarwanda the biblical epic Umulirimbyi wa Nyili-Ibiremwa [The Cantor of the Master-of-Creation] from 1941 to 1966. Inspired by biblical revelations, this epic tells the story of humanity: from all eternity, from the evolution of humanity in the universe to the period of the two World Wars and the creation of the United Nations. Kagame’s theological approach was noticed by Pope Pius XII, who congratulated...
him on the task completed and praised him for the orthodoxy of this work and for the value it represented in Christian literature.

Along with this biblical epic, Kagame spoke of progress made by the missionaries in terms of the development of Rwandan society through *Isoko y'amajyambera* (vol III). This progress idealises the foundation of a Rwandan Christian culture based on two projects of complementary societies: that of the Rwandan monarchs to achieve the objectives relating to the well-being and the education of the population and to the organisation and expansion of the country, as well as that of Monsignor Léon Classe, who gave himself the mission of Christianising Rwanda and fostering its technological advancement.

Léon Classe’s mission thus came to complete the civilisation started by Rwandan actors, and his work reached its climax in 1943 with the baptism of King Mutara III Rudahigwa. He received Christian first names (Charles Léon Pierre) and accepted to administer his country in accordance to the examples of the Christian and humanist kings of Europe. Here the link and resonance between Rwanda and Belgium are highlighted by the integration into the Rwandan epic of Léon Classe, the humanist kings of Europe, new elements (baptism, consecration of Rwanda to Christ the King). This story highlights the hitherto unexplored poetic potentials that served as a foundation for multicultural values, openness, and adherence to the new Rwandan Christian culture.

Let us also highlight that this focus on poetry to service Christian thought is not coincidental. At a literary level, this innovative method gave Kagame the opportunity to immortalise in writing traditional poetry while bypassing the formal codes of traditional genres by introducing thematic variations. On the other hand, poetry, as a communication tool employed by the monarchy, always occupied an important place in disseminating political ideologies. It is therefore a functional and efficient channel for several reasons. It has the privilege of connecting with Rwandans on an emotional level; it represents a sort of storehouse of Kinyarwanda lexicon that, when faced with European civilisation, loses its footing. Above all, it is also the politically correct means by which disputes are formulated in a subtle manner.

Kagame used poetry to express his indignation against methods of evangelisation based on colonial ethnocentrism. He deplored the actions of some disguised missionaries who not only set out to remove the cultural elements incompatible with the Christian doctrine but also took it upon themselves to implant, at all costs, their own cultural elements. With *Umulirimbyi wa Nyi-li-Ibiremwa*, he reiterates the principles of equality and freedom of human races:

God created us with Intelligence; at the same time, he flooded us with the Will; both engender Liberty, one of the characteristics of the human nature.
Liberty is by no means the result of the race in which we are born. Whether you are European, Black, or another skin colour. We are all conceived for Liberty.\(^68\)

This same freedom cannot allow one language or culture to override another on the pretext of belonging to a human group considered superior or inferior. In this process, we must therefore put Kinyarwanda at the service of a Christian philosophy through literary creation and translation, not only to oppose the one-sided view that was held by some but also to respond to those who brought Christianity to Rwandans in a Western packaging and under historical and sociological conditions that did not allow missionaries to indigenise it. The African collective conscience, now awakened, is not opposed to the Christian message but to the attitude of those who imagine it is synonymous with European civilisation.\(^69\)

In addition to Kinyarwanda poetry, Alexis Kagame’s theological quest can also be seen in his contribution through scientific articles. In 1957, in *Des Prêtres noirs s’interrogent* [Black Priests ask Questions], Alexis Kagame, and the young African priests studying in Europe (Vincent Mulago, Meinrad Hebga, and Englebert Mveng), who were undeniably receptive to the Negritude movement, demanded a real Africanisation of the Church.\(^70\) They were convinced that ‘[t]he Church will be African in Africa otherwise it should not be in Africa.’\(^71\) Furthermore, Kagame expressed himself in *Le Colonialisme face à la doctrine missionnaire à l’heure de Vatican II* [Colonialism and the Missionary Doctrine at the Time of Vatican II], challenging the domination of missionaries and the destructive effects of this presence on the local clergy.

The criticism subtly initiated by Kagame in written poetry has served as a model for post-colonial poets, such as Rugamba Cyprien and Gasimba François-Xavier, who address different subjects of current political, social, or economic interest.
Conclusion

Alexis Kagame’s work is crucial to reflect on Rwanda’s colonial past and the resonance of this past in post-colonial Rwanda. Faced with the universalism advocated by Belgian colonisers in Rwanda who considered Belgium to be the source of administrative and economic policy, religion, education, and territorial division, Kagame opted for a more open-ended and open-minded brand of universalism – that is, a posture embracing the plurality of languages and cultures and the search for a ‘dialogical horizon based on diversity’.72

Seen as a nationalist by some critics, ambiguity may arise about this Catholic priest, cultural broker, and intellectual regarding his positions as a convinced defender of the culture and the people of Rwanda who also championed the universalism of the Christian religion. What is most paradoxical is his silence regarding Bishop Léon Classe’s missionary policy, which he praised despite the catastrophic results of his actions in Rwanda and Classe’s active role in the dissemination of the racial prejudices that became constitutive of a murderous political ideology. However, he anticipated with remarkable prescience that Rwandan culture was being threatened to extinction by the domination of civilising and universalising projects such as colonisation and Christianisation. Confronted with these, his choice was to receive and to give in order to move towards a common horizon.

Alexis Kagame’s response to Belgian colonisation in Rwanda was of paramount importance and its resonance is still pervasive in Rwanda now. Despite certain grey areas, he was driven by an ambition to produce a context in which Belgium and Rwanda would work together to achieve a pluriracial and pluricultural coexistence and create a collective conscience purged of any form of domination and unconscious submission. Although the constancy of his optimism did not produce all the desired results, his logic (adding rather than erasing) strove to tirelessly challenge the rationale behind colonial knowledge production.
Notes

4. The Protestant missionaries arrived in Rwanda before the Catholic missionaries and left at the same time as the German troops after their defeat in the First World War. Thereafter, the resumption of the Lutheran missionaries became very challenging given the monopolistic intents of the Catholic missionaries.
6. See the flattering portrait of Léon Classe for his action in Rwanda by Alexis Kagame in the historiographical poem Isoko y'umajyambere, Vol III (Kabgayi: Éditions Morales, 1951).
8. Sekarama is one of Rwanda's great poets known for his important role in the memorisation and transmission of Rwanda's history, in particular, the reigns of Kigeli IV Rwabugiri and Mutara III Rudahigwa.
17. On this derogatory approach to African languages, see Alain Ricard, The Languages and Literatures of Africa (Oxford; James Currey, 2004).
25. The initial vowel (indomo), the noun class marker/classifier (indanganteko), the root (igicumbi) and the désinence (umusoza).
30. From 1941 to 1966, Kagame became the creator of his own literary texts through the inspiration of diverse traditional literary genres which he collected, transcribed and translated.

32. This policy of prioritising languages by the Belgians has been studied by various authors [on Swahili]: Johannes Fabian, *Language and Colonial Power*; and also Michael Meewis, 'Bilingual Inequality: Linguistic Rights and Disfranchisement in Late Belgian Colonization', *Journal of Pragmatics*, 43 (2011), 1279–87.

33. See Souleymane Bachir Diagne's conference 'Quand traduire est un acte de décolonisation, Souleymane Bachir Diagne (Columbia University), « Quand traduire est un acte de décolonisation » – YouTube [accessed 15 September 2021].


36. *Kalinga* is the name of the emblem drum of the Rwandan dynasty. *Inganji Kalinga* is the title of the book, the first volume of which was published in 1943, the second in 1950, and then the two volumes together in 1959.


46. Ubwiru was an important esoteric-political institution, subsidiary to the kingdom, having the duty to preserve and adapt the sacred kingdom in the form of a monarchy. The Abiru (royal advisors) were responsible for taking care of the rites the king set about to resolve the country's major problems.


49. Ibid., p. 9.


51. Gérard Gahigi, Kagame, p. 3.


58. Some members of his family are refugees in Uganda, Burundi, Kenya and others in Belgium and Switzerland. After the 1994 Tutsi genocide, some returned to Rwanda; others still live in Europe.


61. The militias have eulogised names bearing their missions/objectives.
63. Organic law n°8/96 of August 30, 1996 on the organisation of the prosecution of offenses constituting the crime of genocide or crime against humanity committed in Rwanda on October 1, 1990.