

# ‘Buying a path’: rethinking resistance in Rwanda

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## ABSTRACT

*In this essay, I tell the story of Jean-Baptiste, the president of a motorcycle taxi drivers' co-operative, and his struggle against the machinations of certain high officials in Kigali City Council. Crucial to this story is the way in which Jean-Baptiste's attempts to retain his position in the face of powerful opposition pit certain agencies of Rwanda's party state against others. I use this ethnographic narrative to question the way in which much scholarship on popular resistance in Rwanda, drawing on Scott's simplified opposition between the powerful and the powerless, opposes 'ordinary Rwandans' to 'the state' as monolithic entities with opposed interests. Theorising Jean-Baptiste's story in terms of Rwandan idioms of relative power and influence, I suggest that such a Manichean view of power and resistance in Rwanda oversimplifies social realities. I propose instead a model of power and resistance that sees the state as a field of capacities and possible relationships that it presents for certain people, where 'paths' to influence and security may be 'bought' – especially, but not exclusively, by those who are 'strong' and 'high'.*

Keywords: power; resistance; Rwanda; state; James C. Scott

## Everyday resistance in Rwanda

The principle concern of students of popular resistance in Rwanda is the way in which peasants do not do or think what they are required to do and think by the Rwandan state. Critiquing this tendency in a recent article, Nicola Palmer (2014) has called for a finer and more detailed analysis of such popular resistance in Rwanda. She points, quite rightly, to the importance of the work of James Scott in framing debates on the subject in Rwanda, contending that Scott is 'one of the dominant analytical frameworks through which governance is assessed' (ibid, p. 231), and that thus theorised, 'resistance to state power has been used as a means to explain social relations in both the colonial and post-colonial periods, highlighting how the policies of a strong centralized state have been ignored, subverted or altered when they are applied at the local level' (ibid). Thus, on one hand, we have accounts of more or less concealed defiance: sloppy or lazy work on communal work parties, playing dumb in the presence of officials, maintaining a sullen silence (ceceka), ironic cheers, laughter or assent and so on (Thomson, 2011). On the other hand, there are accounts of the way in which what peasants think and say amongst themselves is at odds with the kind of 'mindset' demanded by their superiors (Ingelaere, 2009, 2010, 2014). Here the most dramatic example is certainly that provided by Ingelaere who shows how, in the context of compulsory and legally mandated reconciliation and the erasure of ethnic identities, ethnicity in fact flourishes along with ethnically motivated perceptions of injustice.

My objective in this paper is provide a rather different study of resistance. It differs from existing accounts in three important ways. First of all, it is not a story of people avoiding or working against the state, but of people working with parts of the state apparatus and its ideologies to protect and promote their interests. Second, it is not concerned with a totalising conflict between the peasantry and policy, both writ large, but with a rather specific case and the social relations that case involves. Moreover I have attempted to analyse it not in terms of critical theory of one kind or another, but in local idioms of power and influence. Third, its setting is not rural, but urban, relating to an eight-month ethnographic project I conducted with motorcycle taxi drivers in Kigali in 2012.

Crucial to most accounts of resistance in Rwanda is the absence of strong social ties between the significant executive arms of government, even at the local level, and the peasantry at large. Local government in Rwanda since major reforms in 2006 is structured in a rather unusual way (Chemouni, 2014). Unlike local government in neighbouring countries, which often serves as a means for the state to capture provincial elites and distribute favours, Rwandan local government was made smaller by sweeping reforms in 2006. The powerful executive officers of local government, especially in strategically vital districts, are usually party cadres from outside their immediate area, and even if local, owe their main allegiance to the central government for their promotion rather than to their locality (ibid). The institution of performance contracts, imihigo, which are signed between local authorities and their superiors — in the case of district executives, the other signatory is the President of the Republic — further cement the vertical relationships of power and the absence of any effective obligations between local officials and the people that they serve. Indeed, the fulfillment of performance contracts is so important for the political survival of local executives that meeting targets set in imihigo is often at the expense of heavy-handed and brutal tactics to make local people conform (Ingelaere, 2011). The upshot is that the state, certainly in its local incarnations, bears down on the rural population in a profoundly one-sided way, demanding a great deal, but appearing to offer very little.

This is the vital background for understanding the peasants' oppositional stance towards the state in most scholarly accounts of popular resistance in Rwanda. On one hand, local and national government make onerous demands on peasants, which it appears often to be in their interests to avoid or refuse. On the other, the lack of an intimate relationship between the elites that hold office in local government and the people that they govern creates a large 'back-stage' area in which non-compliant ways of thinking and talking about the government, and strategies for covert forms of resistance can be developed and circulate (Scott, 1990).

No wonder, then, that the dominant line of theoretical reasoning applied to popular resistance in Rwanda is drawn from the work of James Scott (1985, 1990 etc. ). Scott is, of course, best known for elaborating theories of 'everyday resistance', a term which captures the way in which disadvantaged groups — peasants, serfs, untouchables, slaves, factory labourers — contest the power of those who dominate them.<sup>1</sup> He contends that 'relations of domination are, at the same time relations of resistance' and that insofar power is about extracting 'work, production, services, taxes against the will of the dominated' — not an unreasonable picture of state-peasant relations in Rwanda — then this will result in 'friction' and resistance (Scott, 1990, p. 45). This resistance is prosecuted covertly, attempting to preserve the values and livelihoods of those at the bottom of the social order while steering clear of outright confrontation. As Scott has documented ethnographically (1987), such resistance can be surprisingly effective in cases where neither the dominant, nor the dominated have any interest in bringing such conflicts into the open. Phrased in this form, it is clear that Scott's ideas conform very well to the general political situation in Rwanda, and can go a long way to interpreting and explaining the kind of foot-dragging non-compliance that is such a feature of accounts of peasant relations to government interventions, which involves 'minimizing the exactions, labour and humiliations to which they are subject' (Scott, 1990, p. 86).

These features of Scott's theory make it vital for understanding the politics of everyday life in Rwanda. The relationship between the demands of a powerful state and the compliance of the population, that is, questions of legitimacy, cut right to the heart of irreconcilable views of the current RPF regime. This regime, under the presidency of Paul Kagame, is well known for its visionary radicalism, whether in the fields of post-genocide reconciliation, land reform or economic and especially urban development (Straus & Waldorf, 2011). Indeed, the regime stakes much of its legitimacy on its record of ending ethnic conflict and providing for economic development — claims which counterbalance the RPF's status as the political wing of an invading army (Booth & Golooba-Mutebi, 2012). For scholars prepared to listen carefully to what ordinary Rwandans, especially peasants, have to say, Scott's notions of the hidden transcript and everyday resistance offer a tool with which to distinguish more or less compulsory performances of support for and compliance with policy from the submerged norms, values and narratives that suggest exactly the inverse political movement is taking place out of sight, in the relations peasants have amongst themselves. Thus, using Scott, analysts such as Ingelaere (2014) can argue that for all the dramatic shows of unified support for a 'new Rwanda' of economic opportunity and ethnic reconciliation, close attention to what peasants say and think about current politics suggests that there has been no dramatic shift in underlying social tensions since 1994, and that the government is tolerated only because it is strong. In other words, for all the talk of development success and post-conflict reconciliation, there is a powerful undercurrent of resentment and dissatisfaction that undermines the regime's key claim to legitimacy as the harbinger of the new Rwanda.

However, such an oppositional model of resistance, in which resistance is always against the state, may not be the whole picture. This is a possibility that emerges clearly from Scott's own work. For Scott, everyday resistance is to be understood against a backdrop that is both physically and symbolically coercive, in the sense that the powerful make real exactions and threaten real violence, but also perpetuate a narrative or cultural scheme that justifies their domination, some form of 'ideology'. However, while a Gramscian theorist might contend that resistance against such domination is possible only insofar as people can escape the hegemonic effects of such ideology and realise the revolutionary potential of their activity, Scott argues the contrary. He suggests that resistance takes place exactly within the ideological envelope of power and with considerable awareness of the concrete possibilities for defiance. Thus resistance is often phrased within the ideological forms of the powerful, and thus both hidden and rendered acceptable. This may be necessary, since peasants and other subordinate groups may object to their situation but are well aware that outright defiance will be crushed; however, they are canny enough to play the elite's

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<sup>1</sup> For a critique of Scott's position see Ortner (1995) and Sahlins (2000).

game, speak their language, and use the system of power as a defensive screen for their subversive activities.

Hence in an illuminating passage, Scott contends that an adequate account of resistance demands attention to its dialogic character. 'Any dominant ideology with hegemonic pretensions,' he suggests, 'must, by definition, provide subordinate groups with political weapons that can be of use' in open politics (1990, p. 101). Thus domination does not prevent resistance, but structures it, by shaping subordinates' capacity for political action in particular ways.<sup>2</sup> Hence, in all but the most extraordinary cases, where rebellions and revolutions seek to sweep away the established order for entirely utopian ends, domination and resistance take place equally within the structures established by the social form power and control take in a given context, a form that also specifies quite exactly the means of resistance and subversion that will be effective.

Of course, an analysis of this kind is implicit in accounts of peasants' defiance against the Rwandan state, in the sense that such resistance is possible because of that state is, paradoxically, both tightly vertically integrated and deeply penetrative on one hand, and only weakly articulated to much of its subject population on the other. Thus, its demands for a new mindset and dramatic lifestyle changes are experienced as onerous, while at the same time its capacity to regulate everyday life effectively is compromised because it lacks social relations or trust with the peasantry. Such an account, however, has the result of producing a rather Manichean picture of Rwandan social life in which the state is ranged against the population, who have little use for it themselves, in a posture of enduring mistrust. What is missing from this picture is the sense in which ordinary people might in fact use the state, its structures and ideology to resist or deflect its demands, or to advance their projects and, reciprocally, the ways in which 'the state' might not be the monolithic entity it is often presented as being. The story I tell in this essay attempts exactly to illuminate such complex deployments and employments of the state in an everyday urban context.

## Jean-Baptiste goes to prison

In 2012 Nyirimana Jean-Baptiste became the second president of the new co-operative of motorcycle taxi drivers in his quarter of Kigali city, Koperative Kora Neza Motari. It was in September that year that his real difficulties began.

He was sitting at night in the co-operative offices, counting money — a great deal of money: RWF 400,000 that his co-operative had raised in taxes and fees, plus another RWF 270,000 that his members had contributed to the national Agaciro development fund. This last sum was an achievement he was pleased with and hoped would help to secure his position in the rough and tumble world of Kigali's motorcycle taxi business.

Then the police came. There must have been quite a lot of them, and they came with three men he knew. Two worked in the city council, in the office for good governance, he thought. The other was Albert. Albert was the chief of one of the city's two rival federations of motorcycle taxi co-operatives, the one Jean-Baptiste did not belong to. Jean-Baptiste knew at once the only thing that could connect these men to him, or explain why they were there in the night with a squad of police. As the newspapers would later put it, *impamvu Kwimana Claude atungwa urutoki* — because Claude Kwimana, a senior official in the city council, had ordered it.

What could Jean-Baptiste do? The police grabbed him, they wanted him to get in the car, but somehow he managed to get away and ran as fast as he could in the dark to the black road. There

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<sup>2</sup> A concern he clearly shares with Foucault (1990, 1995) and de Certeau (1984), although their work does not figure in his argument in this connection.

would be soldiers there, and sure enough he managed to meet a patrol. Maybe Jean-Baptiste had been a soldier — he certainly liked to give a military impression when he talked. In any case, the soldiers listened to his frantic appeals and came with him back to the office, where the police were finishing going through everything that they could find. The RWF 670,000 was, of course, missing.

The sergeant in charge of the patrol asked the leader of the policemen what they were doing. The police said that they were just there to collect some jackets — the identifying gilets that motorcyclists in Kigali have to wear. It seemed as though KORANEZA was being shut down. Did they have a warrant? No warrant was forthcoming, but names were probably named and connections suggested. The police insisted. Jean-Baptiste was put in the car and driven to brigade.

Next morning, he was back out on the street, bruised, dirty and hungry. The local police commander saw no reason for him to be in a cell, there was no record of his arrest and he had no idea what he was doing there so he sent him on his way. But Jean-Baptiste wasn't outside for long. The brigade commander might not know why Jean-Baptiste needed to be in a cell, but Kwimana did, and he insured that the very highest echelons of the police service in Kigali also knew. They no doubt had their reservations, but Kwimana was an influential man. What could they do? Jean-Baptiste had to face the court on charges of corruption and just like the police, the court understood the situation very well. Jean-Baptiste landed back in prison.

## Motorcycles

I came across this story unexpectedly at the very end of an eight-month period of ethnographic fieldwork in Kigali between January and September of 2012. During this period I studied the lives and livelihoods of motari in a 'popular quarter' of the city. My main research concerns related to the relation between motari and Kigali City Council (KCC) in the context of a massive urban redevelopment programme (Rollason, 2013) mandated by the Kigali Conceptual Masterplan (Oz Architecture and Kigali City Council, 2007). However, conducting my work involved me in two other areas: the social relations that constitute and sustain motorcyclists' profession, which they call *ikimotari*, 'the thing of the motorcyclists'; and the often fraught relationship between motari, local government authorities, especially KCC, and the police.

At the end of my period of fieldwork, 10,466 motari were officially registered with KCC. Kigali had a population just over a million at the time, which is to say that officially, about one person out of every hundred in the city was a motorcyclist. In practice, because many riders are either not properly registered, or ride undocumented as *inyeshyamba* (rebels), the number of motorcyclists is considerably higher than suggested by the official figure. At the taxi stand where I conducted most of my work, between 25 and 30% of riders were undocumented. Most of the men who ride motorcycles for a living are young, mainly under 30 — so within the Rwandan government's definition of 'youth' (Sommers, 2012) — and the vast bulk are educated only to the end of primary school. Around half of the eighty or so men for whom I have demographic data are from outside the city, of whom about 50% are from the rural areas included in Kigali since the reform of provincial boundaries in 2006, while the remaining men are from other provinces, mainly Southern Province, at the time the most impoverished area of the country (National Institute of Statistics, 2012).

I worked to learn about motari and their livelihoods in three main ways. Most important was simply hanging out on the stand I had chosen, where riders wait to pick up customers, men without papers or machines sit about hoping to pick up work, and a great deal of informal socialising takes place. I spent several hours every day simply talking to motorcyclists and listening to what they had to say. In support of this ethnographic data, I also conducted interviews, gathering demographic data and information about education, household sizes, motorcycle ownership and career paths, as well as generating broadly comparable responses to a series of questions about riders' attitudes to their work, the city authorities and development, which I had developed on the basis of informal

conversations. Finally, in an urban context, and especially in as highly a regulated environment as Kigali, it was necessary to interview key officials in KCC, the Traffic Police, and other important state agencies responsible for overseeing public transport, notably the Rwanda Utilities Regulatory Authority (RURA) and especially with motorcyclists' own co-operative organisations. This activity involved me in working closely with officials in one of the two umbrella organisations for motorcyclists, as well as with officials from local motorcyclists' co-operatives.

The day-to-day control of the sector is effected through such co-operative or syndicate organisations. Co-operatives, formally established in Rwanda under a 2007 law under the authority of the Ministry of Economics and Finance (Republic of Rwanda, 2007) are in principle free associations of people who come together to advance their economic interests. Syndicate organisations, established under the authority of the Ministry of Labour are similar. However, in the *ikimotari*, co-operative or syndicate membership is compulsory and only members are allowed to work as *motari*.<sup>3</sup> At the lowest level, these organisations are generally local affairs, the largest having a few hundred members. However, they are organised by district and province and integrated into a national federations, FERWACOTAMO (Federation Rwandaise des Conducteurs de Taxi Moto) and its considerably smaller but growing rival, SYTRAMORWA (Syndicat des Transporteurs des Taxis Motos au Rwanda). Both FERWACOTAMO and SYTRAMORWA answer ultimately to their respective line ministries.

Co-operatives have a number of functions and effects in the *ikimotari*. Formally, The Rwanda Co-operative Agency declares that, 'a cooperative is an autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social, and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly-owned and democratically-controlled enterprise, according to internationally recognized co-operative values and principles' (<http://www.rca.gov.rw/spip.php?article89>). In practice, however, most motorcyclists' co-operatives function only weakly in terms of 'co-operative values and principles'. While most co-operative officials I interviewed claimed to be in a position to provide loans for members, or to assist them either by buying motorbikes or helping them to get bank credit, their contribution to the livelihoods of individual *motari* is slight. Much more significant for the operation of the moto sector is the role co-operatives play in the control of motorcyclists. It is the co-operatives that take charge of guaranteeing members' identities through the provision of membership documents and by distributing identifying jackets produced by FERWACOTAMO and SYTRAMORWA. Likewise, they adopt many police functions, discharged by uniformed security personnel, who monitor motorcyclists' behaviours and either punish breaches of rules themselves, or co-operate with the the police to do so. Perhaps most importantly, co-operatives function as a channel for policy guidance and 'sensitisation', allowing the police, KCC and government ministries to access the *ikimotari* and issue instructions.

Beyond these procedural roles, motorcyclists' organisations have a further social function, at least according to *motari*. They operate to take members' fees and co-operative shares, fines for breaches of co-operative rules, sponsorship and other monies and redistribute them to the leaders of the co-operatives. These leaders are widely regarded as 'eating corruption' or, more graphically, 'eating their members'. While solid evidence is difficult to come by, most motorcyclists regarded co-operatives as working mainly in the interests of co-operative leaders, who might have other business interests, but regarded the organisations, which suffer from a chronic lack of oversight, as part of a portfolio of investments delivering rents of one kind or another. The control function of co-

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<sup>3</sup> This is a *de facto* arrangement. RURA regulations stipulate that a motorcyclist has to belong to a formal organisation in order to obtain a permit to carry passengers. Such an organisation might be a co-operative, a syndicate or a company. However, since at the time of my fieldwork there were no commercial motorbike companies in Kigali, this meant that co-op or syndicate membership was effectively compulsory to drive in compliance with regulations. Motorcyclists certainly understood that such membership was a requirement.

operatives is therefore supplemented by the extraction of rents for the benefit of a class of petit-bourgeois 'big hustlers' who generally occupy the principle positions in these organisations.

## KORANEZA

KORANEZA was established in 2012 as a direct reaction to the stifling control and endemic corruption of motorcyclists' co-operatives in that part of the city. KORANEZA certainly set out to be a model of transparency and set itself against corruption, one of a series of co-operatives set up in 2011 and 2012 in opposition to what many motari saw as the corrupt practices and ineffectiveness of the existing organisations, especially the long-established co-operative in the quarter.

Walking to a dive bar in Nyamirambo, I asked my friend and KORANEZA member Alphonse how long he had been a member of the co-operative. Alphonse said that it was new, 'it hasn't arrived', only something like five months old. He had joined it recently. He used to be a member of the long-established local co-operative. Later in the bar, I asked him why he had joined KORANEZA — what was so good about it? Alphonse explained that KORANEZA was a co-operative for old members of the established co-op. People want to leave it because of some problems, he told me. Lots of people are upset because of the president. A lot of money was 'killed'. I asked if that meant 'eaten' and he agreed. He said that the president had business dealings in South Africa. He went there using the co-operative's money. This made a profit for himself, but it meant that other people lost out. People were sick of this, which was why they were joining the new co-operative.

KORANEZA set its share — the money a member must contribute to the co-operative's capital in order to join — very low. Jean-Baptiste explained passionately that this was to 'help the youth'. Considering that co-operative membership was compulsory, his argument was that it should not cost RWF 30,000 or even RWF 50,000 as some co-ops charged. Rather he set the share at just RWF 10,000. Indeed, Jean-Baptiste thought that he had gone further in his attempts to provide something for his young members by founding the co-operative, in that he appeared to have secured a deal with the Chinese motorcycle manufacturer, Lifan, to acquire 300 new motorcycles for his members to buy in hire-purchase arrangements. The low fee, in combination with what appeared to be a very attractive offer to members — Jean-Baptiste brandished the business card of Lifan's country director for Rwanda at every possible opportunity — had attracted many members from the old co-op.

This success was not, however, without its costs. Certainly, KORANEZA's aggressive strategy aroused the hostility of other branch co-operatives. Jean-Baptiste told me that as a result of KORANEZA's success, 'our co-op was famous amongst the youth, but they [other co-op leaders] weren't happy about that. These people were at the head of a plot against us'. Since these co-ops were better established, and had superior contacts with the city council, especially to the office Kwimana Claude which usually organised meetings of co-operative leaders, KORANEZA was largely excluded from formal decision making processes from the outset and had few formal contacts either with KCC or, indeed, its own umbrella organisation. As a result, members had difficulty getting the identifying jackets that they needed to work, and many rode with jackets that had been modified to display KORANEZA's code letters, in contravention of regulations.

KORANEZA became vulnerable primarily, it seems from these stories, because the new co-operative had aroused the jealousy of powerful people without having the resources to forge the kinds of relationships that would offer the fledgling co-operative protection. Kwimana held an office in the city council that had nothing to do with co-operatives but, one person close to events told me, 'he likes to enter into the business of co-ops, things that don't concern him because he thinks that he can get something out of them.' As for Albert, 'he is jealous because KORANEZA members were coming from his organisation. Because he knows how to talk to Kwimana and give him something he can make Kwimana do what he wants.' KORANEZA did not have the same capacity to get a hearing in the city council: 'for us, we didn't have anything to give. We were just at the beginning'.



Things came to a head in September and October of 2012. I had left the field in September 2012 to resume teaching, so was not present in Kigali for the events that followed. However, I did return briefly in January of 2013, when I was told the story of Jean-Baptiste's arrest from a number of sources close to KORANEZA and from within KCC. Indeed, it was the day after I returned that I learned that in my absence, Jean-Baptiste had been imprisoned and only recently released. I immediately assumed that he had been caught for corruption, but my friends and contacts were keen to expand the story so that I would understand the difficulties that they had faced. While it appeared that he had been the victim of an attempt to capture control of the co-operative masterminded by Kwimana in partnership with rival motorcyclists' organisations, they had nevertheless succeeded in beating back this attack. They explained to me how this had been achieved.

## How did Jean-Baptiste get out of prison?

I met three times with Jean-Baptiste in the two weeks I was in Kigali in January 2013, and he told me his story at length. He was deeply troubled by what had happened, and found it very hard to control himself as he spoke about the ill-treatment and humiliation he had suffered. However, he resolutely insisted on one thing: he did not blame his government or intend any criticism of it. He told me:

I'm not saying bad words about my country or our leaders. I am telling you about specific individuals. Even God says that everyone will be asked what they did. I love my country, and I like what they [the leaders] do. They solve problems in the right way. RPF is the engine of government — they stopped the genocide... I don't want to spoil the image of the country.

Also, this will show Europeans that we have justice and democracy. For people who want to bring investment, it's good that they can see justice.

Sitting across the battered desk in the co-operative office that he had re-entered as a free man just two weeks before, Jean-Baptiste took up the story again. 'God was close,' he said, 'but leaders were also close'. He explained how Kwimana had had him replaced as president:

Kwimana, for his plan, organised an election at the stadium [the national Amahoro Stadium in Remera, another district of Kigali entirely]. He brought members of other co-ops — not KORANEZA members — and he held the meeting at night. He used people who are not our members, in a place that is only for meetings of the whole of our national organisation in the city. This is not right. He wanted to hide what they were doing from the leaders in the Sector.

Newspapers later reported that the meeting, most unusually, was held at 8 pm. It is illegal for people who are not members of a co-operative to vote in its meetings. No-one may be a member of two co-operatives that do similar work. Kwimana was probably concerned about attention from the Sector authorities — the administrative level below the powerful District — because the Sector carries great deal of responsibility for the registration of co-operatives in its area, and as such is likely to have an investment in these organisations.

But the news did reach the local administrators at the levels of the Sector, the Cell, immediately below it in the hierarchy, and even the District. Jean-Baptiste rifled through a stack of letters 'blaming those people [the officers Kwimana had elected to run KORANEZA] and chasing them from office.' He sighed, 'eventually it was done by force.' He showed me the letters. The Sector and Cell executive secretaries had written at length to Kwimana and to other officials, denouncing

the new committee of KORANEZA and demanding that they depart. One was written to the new president, Albert, rejecting him as president and recognising Nyirimana Jean-Baptiste. Moreover, the Sector Executive took the co-operative stamp and the keys for the office from the secretary of KORANEZA for safekeeping. She refused to surrender either to Albert, and even to Kwimana in a show of defiance. Without stamp or office, the co-op could not perform any official business.

So there was a standoff between the Sector and Kwimana and the new committee of KORANEZA. But the old committee was not idle. They worked to ensure that these events were reported in the newspaper and on the radio. Kwimana was unwilling to comment on what was going on, so it was the KORANEZA side of the story that made it into the news. Meanwhile, the Sector Executive was sending reports up the local government hierarchy. Finally, as the newspaper put it, 'Mayor Ndayisaba [the Mayor of Kigali] was alerted to the problem, recognised KORANEZA and forbade Kwimana from demolishing the co-op'. Jean-Baptiste was released soon after and the charges against him quashed. Jean-Baptiste concluded, 'the Sector and cell supported me, even though they have less power than Kwimana and KCC — but they are not above the law'. In his version of the story, his release and the reinstatement of KORANEZA was a victory for the rule of law against abuse.

Other people close to the events, however, disputed that this could really be the case. They thought that, given the balance of power between Kwimana and Albert, with their strong connections to KCC, and the local executives at Cell and Sector level, some other agency must have been involved to secure Jean-Baptiste's release. It was widely alleged both by motorcyclists I spoke to and by other people with experience of similar difficulties that the only way in which Jean-Baptiste's problem could have been solved was through an appeal to the ruling party, the Rwandan Patriotic Front, the RPF, directly, essentially bypassing the official structures of the state altogether. The key point was summed up neatly by a close friend:

The RPF has solved the problem, but it won't be easy to know it was them. It must have been them because the Sector and Cell are below Kwimana, who is on top in KCC — so it must have been RPF.

A KORANEZA member explained what happened in the following terms:

KCC didn't want to work with us. It was a problem, but the president was smart and ended the problem. He had to use someone with more strength than KCC. Everything we did to get back in our group was because of RPF. We had to go to HQ and explain. They understood and fixed everything. Those people were working in secret [those attacking KORANEZA], but RPF solved that problem publicly.

A discussion with a group of people with strong connections to the motorcycle taxi business revealed what seems at least to be a popular model of how such problems might be resolved. One man asserted:

The RPF is the party that has the power. They are also responsible for the people. Their target is to help Rwandans in general. Those people [Kwimana and his associates] are also in the party, but it doesn't support them. What RPF does is to take the problems of all Rwandans and solve those problems.

Another offered a more detailed explanation:

If you have a problem you can usually go to the police because the police is close to the people, but you can also try to contact the ordinary leaders — if you have their phone

numbers. The reason they [KORANEZA] had to go to RPF is because the city council is strong. Usually when you need a problem solved quickly, you go where there is much power. They can solve the problem quickly and in a nice way.

The party chiefs have direct lines to the President [of Rwanda]. Their role is to make sure that everything in the country is going OK. They can redirect officials, persuading them to change their plans. They have an image of a family with the RPF at its head. They like to make sure that there are no conflicts.<sup>4</sup>

Jean-Baptiste's escape from prison and KORANEZA's capacity to resist Kwimana's attack therefore depended on one of two things. On one hand, the co-operative might have been saved by the bravery of local officials, and Jean-Baptiste's successful appeal that they uphold his rights and their own rhetoric as authorities that represent the people. On the other, it is entirely possible, indeed probably more likely, that it was the co-operative's capacity to appeal to the party as loyal members, again no doubt making use of the party's own rhetoric of familial solidarity and national unity, that saved KORANEZA. Either way, what is crucial in this story is the ability of subordinate groups to mobilise aspects of the state apparatus for their own purposes, even to resist the actions of other actors backed by other sections of the state.

## Buying a path

Indeed, there is some evidence that such uses of the state, or of power more generally are fairly well elaborated in the way ordinary Rwandans talk about their political situation. A mutual acquaintance of Jean-Baptiste and myself commented on the self-conscious way in which Jean-Baptiste openly supported the RPF when he spoke, especially at KORANEZA meetings. He remarked that Jean-Baptiste spent a lot of time praising the government, quoting the president and generally demonstrating his loyalty to the regime.

He said that this was called *kugira inzira* — to buy a path. It could also be called *guhakwa* — to work as a slave for someone. He said:

To be secure in your business you have to use the government — to use their speeches and say they are right. The president [of KORANEZA] likes to quote and support the president: [taking Jean-Baptiste's voice] "we have a great president whom the people of Rwanda will vote a hundred times"... They think that if I say these words, they [the government] will think "he is a good person" and so I will avoid problems.

The expression *kugira inzira* can also be used of buying beer and generally demonstrating friendship and respect to someone so that they will support and help you. This kind of activity is central to much social activity. By this logic, Rwandan social life is crisscrossed by paths — the

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<sup>4</sup> Nobody, it should be noted, complained about the role they saw the party as having taken in Jean-Baptiste's release. There was a general acceptance that he had been treated unjustly, and that some degree of fairness had been restored by what had happened. Everyone was aware that there was a chance that similar things could happen to them, and especially the motorcyclists I spoke with about what had happened were full of nothing but praise for the authorities — both in their official capacity in the Sector and Cell, and in the form of the RPF — for solving their problems. They fully accepted the role of the RPF as a shadow to the state, an alternative source of support in the business of balancing one source of power against another to protect or advance a person's interests.

means by which people pursue their projects and protect their interests — which have either been purchased, or which are or might be for sale.<sup>5</sup>

One place where such paths can be established, bought and sold is within the mechanisms of the state, insofar as its structures enable this kind of activity. Jean-Baptiste was certainly active in his cultivation of the local executive secretaries at Cell and Sector level and was clearly very successful in garnering their support, much as Albert had clearly purchased a path to the control of KORANEZA through his management of his relationship with Kwimana. Moreover, we could argue that the Rwandan state is structurally open to this kind of activity insofar as it is not a singular entity but a collection of agencies. Not only does the decentralisation of the state deliberately produce a large number of potentially effective points of contact with the population — it is not difficult to see the executives of Sectors or Cells, even Districts — but the state is systematically doubled by the party. Since the vast majority of people, in Kigali at any rate, are members of the party, this in principle provides most people with an alternative path to address problems and defend their interests. Nor, as is clear from Jean-Baptiste's story, are the actions of particular agencies of government necessarily the will of the party, which may overrule and redirect officials. Indeed, most of the people I spoke to thought that this was likely to happen provided that a person could represent themselves as a loyal support who was suffering injustice. Hence, whatever its official policy or formal structure, the state or perhaps more accurately, the state-party apparatus, presents its own paths which can be bought by people willing to pay the price to create the relationships that will allow them to mobilise elements of it in their support.

This implication is supported by a proverbial form reported both by Des Forges (1986) and Ingelaere (2011), which compares the respective powers of 'the drum' (*ingoma*), which represents the king, the state or rulers, and 'the shout' (*induru*) which stands for the people. According to Ingelaere, popular wisdom in rural Rwanda has it that 'the shout is not winning from the drum' (*ibid*, p. 67), which is to say that the will of the state overrules the will of the people. However, Ingelaere also quotes one of his interlocutors who offers a more nuanced image of the relationship between the state and the people. It is worth quoting at length what this man had to say:

In Rwandan tradition and custom, power is symbolized by the drum [*Ngoma*]. If you put your hands on the drum, it means you have power ... The only means for [others] to access the drum and thus power is to violently chop off the arm reaching for the drum and holding up those other arms. The drum comes in the hands of another and other arms are mustered to support and be supported by the drum' (*ibid*, p. 75, my emphasis).

What is crucial about this quotation is not the individualising image of power located in the drum — *ingoma* can mean both a drum and the reign of a king — but that of the arms that reach for the drum, both to support and be supported by it. Thus we find a tension in the heart of this image of power: on one hand the drum of state overcomes the popular shout, but at the same time, the drum requires or invites support. People can reach out towards the drum to support it, but their gesture also supports them in turn. Insofar as people can position themselves in mutually supportive relations to power, the opposition between the drum and the shout, the state and the people, may not be as stark or as threatening as the proverb at first implies.

In fact, taken together with the imagery of buying a path, or selling oneself as a slave to the powerful that my friend used to comment on Jean-Baptiste's political conduct, this suggests a much more nuanced vision of power and its possibilities than the oppositional relationship between the state and the peasantry that is so often presented in analyses of resistance in Rwanda. When they explained why they thought that Jean-Baptiste had been able to win out against Kwimana, my

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<sup>5</sup> Taylor (1988, 1999) makes a similar argument, but based on the notion of flows rather than paths. I adopt the language of paths from the expression *kugira inzira*.

interlocutors expressed themselves in terms of an economy of 'strength' (imbalaga) and through imagery of 'high' and 'low' positions or 'levels' (inzego). These are typical ways of talking about relative social status and influence in Rwanda. Thus KCC, 'on top' could not normally be opposed by Sector or Cell authorities — and certainly not by Jean-Baptiste himself — because they were 'on the bottom'. By virtue of his high position, Kwimana was strong, but even those on the bottom could increase their strength by connecting themselves to people even higher and stronger, as hands reaching for the drum. We should note that neither strength nor level are absolute in this connection. The people I spoke to did not make a hard and fast distinction between 'the high' and 'the low' or 'the strong' and 'the weak'. Rather the relative strength of people with different types of resources, capacities and networks was at issue.

## Rethinking resistance

If this story represents 'resistance', then we might plausibly suggest that the way in which popular resistance is theorised in Rwanda, mainly making use of Scott's ideas may be a strictly rural phenomenon. The lack of connection between the ruling elite and the peasantry is quite well established: mainly drawn from returning Tutsi refugees, propelled into power by victory in the 1990-94 civil war, the RPF lacks deep roots in the countryside, is generally regarded as suspicious of the peasants, and finds most of its most active supporters in urban populations (Booth & Golooba-Mutebi, 2012; Chemouni, 2014). As such the **oppositional relations** described between peasants and the state in rural locations may be an artifact of the lack of 'paths' between peasants and officials, which would also explain why peasant resistance seems so ineffective in these accounts.<sup>6</sup> Peasants at present, we might argue, have little social reality for the state, appearing as an often-recalcitrant mass to be treated at arms length, with few social resources to draw on that might deflect state action.

Equally, Jean-Baptiste's story would lead us to question the opposition between the powerful and the powerless or the state versus 'ordinary Rwandans' on which much of the literature on the subject is predicated. Considering the politics unleashed by the case of KORANEZA, it would be difficult to regard what Kwimana planned as a 'state intervention', although his plan certainly depended on the use or deployment of the power of the state. The resistance that developed around KORANEZA likewise depended on alliances with the media and the state, notably at the level of local government, but ultimately implicating the mayor of Kigali, who is a very senior official. It likely also involved the party, which is not formally a component of state, but penetrates it very deeply. However, in this case, we find the party working with ordinary citizens and some elements of 'state' against other elements of 'the state'. Of course, neither states nor governments — even in political contexts as tightly controlled as Rwanda's — are unitary entities, but ideas actuated through the specific schemes and actions of definite people. The clear suggestion here is that we might regard the state less as an institutional entity and more in terms of the field of capacities and possible relationships it presents for certain people — especially, but not exclusively, those who are strong and high.

This is a vision that is very difficult to accommodate in the generally dualistic terms of accounts of peasant discontent in Rwanda. It seems to me to invite an alternative modeling, based on a distinction between formal structures and the informal connections of actual life. This is a distinction that scholars of urban Africa, notably Simone (2004), have drawn on to great effect. Simone's argument is essentially that African cities should not be envisioned in terms of their abstract, reticulated grids, a point of view that can only lead to their being judged as failures. Rather, to understand their social life, why and how certain kinds of activities and persons become possible in these environments, it is necessary to uncover the often ephemeral, serendipitous,

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<sup>6</sup> An alternative explanation would be, of course, that scholars have neglected the relationships that do exist between peasants and local authorities, a suggestion that Palmer (2014), at least notes.

submerged and surreptitious relationships, alliances and connections that make life possible and open up opportunities. These relationships, Simone argues, typically cut across the city envisaged as a formal system, but create it as a human social environment (see also de Boeck, 2004; Rakodi, 2006). In light of Jean-Baptiste's story it might, therefore, be better to think about the state as something out of which people fashion schemes for dominance, and in which they find resources to resist rather than as an entity that bears down on a population, much as people find 'strength' and aspire to 'rise up the levels' in everyday social life. Just as a city in Simone's vision is a place to lead a social life, not a system which does or does not work, so the formal relation between state and citizen, power and subordination in Rwandan might be rethought as a structured field of relations affording the strength and high positions to make things happen, and embedding the risks that come with being weaker and lower than others.

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