

Extreme



Words and Photography by Killian Doherty

Citizenship

RECONCEPTUALISING THE DWELLING
WITHIN THE LANDSCAPES OF RWANDA



“Where would you live tomorrow if there were no laws in Rwanda?” I ask an indigenous community who not only live on the edges of a forest, but of contemporary Rwandan society itself. Writhing in their chairs the community interviewees grinned at one another simultaneously and break into laughter. Their Chief looks at me incredulously and says, “Tomorrow? We would go back to the forest, for that is where all the food is!”

Straddling the borders that intersect the Democratic Republic of Congo, Uganda and Rwanda, forests were home to this hunter-gatherer community, who are known as the Batwa. This was until Rwandan laws —influenced by conservationist rhetoric stemming from development programmes —evicted them, separating them from their former livelihoods and in turn forbidding them to identify as a distinct ethnic group. Since then, many of the Batwa lived close to the edges of the forest in makeshift grass thatched huts (grass or ‘Nyakatsi’ as it is known locally is readily available as material and has since become

an adjective for poverty itself). In 2010, a Rwandan ‘shelter task force’ called ‘Bye Bye Nyakatsi’ demolished many of the ‘Nyakatsi’ homes, replacing them with corrugated metal roofs houses. There are about 30,000 Batwa in Rwanda today who’ve been affected by such evictions.

Reflecting on their former life in the forests, we sit outside the Batwa’s new homes topped with government approved sheet metal roofing. These are homes they’ve openly defied in the past through physical destruction: timber windows and doors were removed, broken down and used as firewood. Stored drinking water harvested from these roofs has been syphoned off and sold onto neighbours. Additionally, local representatives inform me that a Batwa community of five families were recently given 50 goats as part of an income generating programme; the entire herd was consumed over a two-day period by the group. Such is the performative defiance of this egalitarian hunter-gatherer community who appear resistant towards domesticity, making them the pariahs of contemporary post-war Rwanda.

The Batwa’s apparent recalcitrance towards their homes is beguiling yet overwhelming. This is something which became evident when I first asked them about their preference of dwelling, which is essentially a question of space (the forest or a house?). These new homes symbolise the Batwa’s subscription to Rwanda as a unified nation where ethnic distinctions are concealed. As an architect, I initially read the destruction of their new homes as a stylistic ‘fuck you’. But this acts goes beyond defiance and lies deeper at the roots of the effects of a forced transition from a mobile lifestyle to that of a fixed one: from forest to home, from grass to metal, from nomads to Joneses. Yet despite having homes like everyone else, no one wants the Batwa as neighbours.

The Batwa are egalitarian by nature and have never owned land, a home nor remained in a fixed abode. There is no need for accumulation of material goods within primitive societies. As Pierre Clastre points out, “There is nothing in the economic working of a primitive

society, a society without a State, that enables a difference to be introduced, making some richer or poorer than others, because no one in such a society feels the quaint desire to do more, want more or appear to be more than his neighbour.” The Batwa’s destruction of the home is not just a defiant act; it satisfies their hand-to-mouth means of existence. Timber windows equals fire, and what is a window to begin with anyway?

To the Rwandan government, the forests represent an uninhabited space, safeguarding the treasured mountain gorilla that tourists pay \$750 a head to gawp at. To the Batwa, the forests are home and a source of physical and emotional wellbeing. The eyes of the Batwa see the world in a relational way: they use a relational language replete with metaphors and spiritual perceptions, while mapping space as one of events and activities. For example, a tree can signify many things to them. It might be a source of food, or it may provide raw materials for medicinal plants or the weaving of rope; it can be a safe place for the stored hanging of goods, whilst simultaneously signifying the reincarnation of a deceased relative who is watching over them. To use the words of human geographer Sébastien Boillat who researches on indigenous knowledge, “The relational perspective means that the ecosystem encompasses humans; it is the presence of humans that makes the land complete.” The Batwa’s relational perspectives and today’s landlessness challenge our own assumptions about ownership within the consumptive heavy postmodern culture we reside in.

It is this relational way of seeing which translates to a mode of defying state capitalism in neighbouring Democratic Republic of Congo and Uganda. Hunter-gatherer Batwa communities there are protecting their rights to land within the forest, while defying local government and multinational bodies’ access to plundering natural resources. This is aided with the use of smart phones, mobile internet and cloud computing—technology that maps and tracks otherwise undocumented deforestation by logging companies in these remote locations. Whilst unable



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to read or write, GPS-savvy Batwa communities use customised pictorial symbols based on their relational understanding of the forests as way to track such extractive transgressions. This information is mapped to advocate against environmental degradation and prevent encroachment upon ancestral lands. This process has been coined as ‘Extreme Citizen Science’ by Dr Jerome

Lewis—an anthropologist at UCL working with hunter-gatherer communities across Sub-Saharan Africa.

The architectural historian Joseph Rwykert, looked to the ‘primitive hut’ for the origins of early architectural principles—an understanding, which he and anthropologist Victor Buchli claim is a quest for a renewal of knowledge “in times of need.” Not to diminish or fetishise about the Batwa (whose social exclusion within Rwanda is dire), the defiance of such communities might be another form of renewal of knowledge against the tide of universalising generic shittiness that (Rwandan) modern culture has to offer. The Batwa are the ones that might well be abandoning homes, and architecture itself, but they are the ‘extreme citizens’ creating new pathways. And if they lead us back to the forest, so be it. ♦



