Rwanda is one of the smallest and poorest countries in Africa, but it has often been in the world news over the last 30 years because of civil wars and horrific tales of hatred worked out in violence.

Ntwari is a Rwandan who grew up in the country during this period. His experience of living in Rwanda reflects some of the events that affected people’s lives and changed the human geography of the country in the later 1900s.

Rwanda is a hilly-to-mountainous country close to the equator (known as “the land of a thousand hills”), but is landlocked and surrounded by other countries - Congo, Uganda, Tanzania, and Burundi (see map in Bradshaw: The New Global Order, second edition, page 90). The highest volcanic peak, Karisimbi (4,507 m, 14,787 ft.) is on the edge of the rift valley that contains Lake Kivu, and most of the country is over 1,220 m (4,000 ft.). This elevation modifies the equatorial climate, bringing temperatures down to just over 20°C (70°F) and resulted in a distinctive type of tropical rainforest vegetation.
Ntwari grew up in southern Rwanda, one of nine children on a typical family plot of land with the house surrounded by banana trees and segments of the land devoted to crops such as maize, beans, potatoes, tropical root crops, a little pasture for a few livestock, and land for growing the cash crop, coffee or cotton. From time to time cousins might come and stay for a year or so, but any grandparents still alive maintained their own plots. Some friends lost their parents in the civil war, but the children continued to live on the family plot, with teenagers raising their younger brothers and sisters.
The family plots were typical of Rwanda and, with a rapidly growing population, their extension cut into almost all the pre-existing forest. Even the Akagera National Park on the eastern border was largely taken over by farmed plots of land. Although the plots can provide both subsistence and cash-crop income, many on steeper slopes suffered soil erosion, reducing the harvest as soils lost their nutrients or flooding destroyed crops. Fluctuating world market prices for coffee often reduced incomes and made families indebted. Rwanda became dependent on international aid to supply food and to fund rural development programs fighting soil erosion. Although the fertility rate remains high, total population growth slowed in the 1990s because of the civil war, a high incidence of HIV/AIDS, and the continuing impact of poor nutrition and tropical diseases such as malaria.

Ntwari went to the local first-level school up to age 15 years. There was no public transport and so he walked the 5 km (3 mi.) to and from school each day with his friends. He was one of 3 from his class of 45 to go on to the second-level school up to age 21 years. Again, one of a small proportion who progressed further in their education, he then studied for a Bachelor degree in sociology and anthropology at the National University in Butare. Jobs were available for his fellow students in government and aid agencies, and for Ntwari in teaching. There was even a shortage of educated local personnel, requiring expatriates to be brought in.

Changes in the 1980s and 1990s resulted in the greater social and political polarization of groups of people within Rwanda. Rural conditions still predominate over most of the country, with traditional ways of
life continuing and a social life based around neighborhood parties. As Kigali, the capital, expanded its role after independence, the increasing numbers of educated young people in government jobs there established new social groups based on professional and business interests or on college links. Increasingly, too, social gatherings brought together peoples in groups from either the north or south of the country.
This division reflected increasing political rivalries.

Following a struggle for independence that involved a civil war and increasing tensions between Hutu and Tutsi peoples, independence was gained from Belgium in 1959. Many of the former ruling Tutsi groups, including the king, went into exile in Europe and America. At first, people from the south, the Nduga, controlled the country's government through their political party, the Democratic Republican Movement (MDR). A mixture of Hutu and Tutsi peoples living easily together, they provided most university students and so gained most government jobs. In 1973, a military coup d'état was led by northerners, the Rukiga, mainly of Hutu peoples, who governed for 20 years through their political party, the Republican Movement for National Development (MRND). During this period the President took control of the military and trained a militia force of northerners. At the same time, southerners, backed by the exiled Tutsis who had former the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), trained their own militias. While the northerners were in government, the mixture of southern peoples were increasingly labelled as "tutsisfriends ofor simply enemies the state."

In 1990 matters came to a head as the RPF invaded Rwanda through Uganda in the north. They advanced southward, pushing back the Rwandan forces into the southern part of the country. This led to a massacre of southerners, who were suspected of working closely with the RPF. Ntwari, working for a church helping increasing numbers of fleeing refugees in Gitarama, was beaten up because he had taught in a school with a Tutsi head teacher (who was murdered) and had a Tutsi wife (many of whose family were killed).
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Peace-keeping efforts prevailed to bring this part of the conflict to an end, but strife erupted again in 1994 when elections for a democratic government were destroyed by the assassination of the newly elected Rwandan President. The country once more descended into civil war. Ntwari and his wife moved westward to a town near the Congo border, where they stayed for a month. Then the former (northerner-based) official Rwandan army and militias disintegrated under the RPF attacks and fled into Congo. Ntwari and his wife moved with them and entered a refugee camp at Bukavu. Almost all the people in the camp were Hutus who hated Tutsis. When Ntwari's wife was threatened with death, she fled and was cared for in hiding by a local family.

Many other Tutsis were killed at this time. The remainder fled into the hills or into Tanzania. The intervention of the largely French Operation Turquoise, backed by the United Nations, saved many Tutsis from the slaughter. They were brought together in camps within Rwanda.

Ntwari decided that there was no immediate future in Rwanda or a refugee camp outside the country. Although most of the non-militia Hutus from the camp returned to Rwanda, he found his way via a boat across Lake Tanganyika into Tanzania and then took a train and bus to Nairobi, Kenya. Having found that he could gain admission to Kenya through this route, he returned to bring out his wife. They persuaded the United Nations Refugee Commission that they would be in danger if they returned to Rwanda and were airlifted from Bukavu camp to Nairobi. Once there, they looked for an opportunity for him to pursue his studies in another part of the world.

The Hutu-Tutsi ethnic differences are blamed for the civil conflict, but it is clearly not just a tribal war. Colonial and post-independence events heightened previous rivalries. Before the colonization of this area by Europeans, the Tutsi tribe had the status of nobility, but people from other tribes could be transferred into the "Tutsi" group following marriage or effective military service, for example. The leadership group became broadly based in tribal terms and was identified as "imfura" - civilized people able to take leadership and speak in public.

The European influence was partly political, with a short-lived German occupation (1897-1918) and a longer Belgian Protectorate (1918-1959), and partly religious. The Roman Catholic church and protestant missionaries had major influences, probably the greatest of any African country. In 1900 the white-robed and white-faced priests ("white fathers") entered the country. In 1943 the Rwandan king was baptized and declared his lands to be a Christian country. New social status was gained by those who became like Europeans in income or education: "umunzunga" indicates a person who is both educated and wealthy, "umusilimu" is one who is educated and not wealthy but still dresses like white people (e.g., a school teacher).

The various strands of social and cultural development led to friction between the better-educated and ethnically more varied southerners and those in the north who felt under-privileged. The military coup in 1973 and the civil war in the 1990s arose from such frictions and destroyed the fledgling economy of this small, poor country.

Ironically, despite attempts to throw off foreign influences, the country remains even more dependent on outsiders and particularly on the European countries and aid agencies that bring funding and expertise for water projects, house building, road and bridge construction, and forestry and advice for farmers.
The Roman Catholic church still runs most of the hospitals and clinics, although other churches are also involved. Any use of modern technology, from computers to telecommunications, occurs in the offices of United Nations and European agencies. All these organizations and projects are designed to work as a partnership with local Rwandans and indeed provide jobs for many of those educated to college level. But the civil war left a heritage of projects that had begun to improve people's lives being destroyed or set back many years.

Rwandans identify a need for improved education as a basis for overcoming the problems they face. This is in the widest sense. There is a need for people to understand the origins of frictions among groups of people. Who arrived first in the country - the Twa (pygmies), Hutu, or Tutsi? What were the grounds of claimed superiority? what did each group contribute? How can tolerance be re-established? What does "democracy" mean and how can it be restored? What is the nature of "development" and how can Rwandans take advantage of offered aid? What are the advantages of family planning in a country where population growth exceeds growth in economic provision? What is the truth about HIV/AIDS in a country with a high incidence and growing mortality rate? Unless the Rwandan people can come to terms with such issues openly, knowledgeably, and democratically, the future of the country will remain bleak.