



World Directory of Minorities

Africa MRG Directory -> Rwanda -> Twa

Twa

Population: 33,000 [Source: CAURWA's 2004 national socio-economic survey carried out in conjunction with the Ministry of Finance's statistics department and with FPP support.]

Profile

The Twa people (or Batwa) can be considered the forgotten victims of the Rwandan war and genocide; their suffering has gone largely unrecognised. Twa can claim to be the original inhabitants of Rwanda, being related to other 'Pygmy' peoples of Central Africa. The Twa are not readily distinguishable from their compatriots, whose language and religious beliefs they share.

However, Twa maintain a rich and distinctive cultural tradition centred on songs, dance and music. Of the 33,000 Rwandan Twa in an estimated 600 households, as estimated by CUARWA in 2004, none are thought to maintain a traditional existence as forest-dwellers. Twa are dispersed throughout the country in small groups. Most work as potters, though others earn a living as day labourers or porters. Almost none own land or cattle.

Historical context

Before independence a small number of Twa obtained a privileged position at the Tutsi royal court as entertainers (and in a few cases as executioners).

Traditionally, the Twa were forest-dwellers. As farming and herding Hutu and Tutsi encroached on and cleared their ancestral forests, Twa were increasingly forced to abandon their traditional lifestyle and culture. On the margins of the new society, some survived by making and selling pottery. By the 1970s agriculture and conservation schemes created ever-greater pressures on the Twa, rendering many landless-without consultation or compensation. In the late 1980s, all remaining forest-dwelling Twa were evicted from Volcanoes National Park, the Nyungwe Forest Reserve, and the Gishwati Forest. As a result of this land confiscation, Twa have lost much of their traditional forest knowledge. Increasing poverty brought on by the loss of their livelihoods in turn led other Rwandans increasingly to stigmatize Twa as social outcasts.

Despite the limited numbers involved, there is a widespread Hutu perception that Twa are sympathetic to Tutsis, reinforced by the involvement of some Twa in Burundi with the overwhelmingly Tutsi army. Very many Twa were killed in the 1994 war and genocide. The Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO) estimates that about 10,000 people, more than a third of the Twa population of Rwanda, were killed and that a similar number fled the country as refugees. The situation varied considerably from area to area. In some places Twa were killed as Tutsi sympathizers or allies; in others Twa participated in the massacres of Tutsis. UNPO reports discrimination against Twa in the distribution of food and other supplies in the refugee camps.

Current issues

Twa are widely stigmatized by both Hutus and Tutsis who consider them ignorant and uncivilized - the Impunyu above all. Taboos surround eating together or even using utensils used by Twa. Social and economic integration of Twa in Rwandan society is extremely limited; these indigenous people can be characterized as a disadvantaged and

marginalized caste.

Twa also remain disadvantaged in education, healthcare, and land rights, but the government of Rwanda, bent on denying ethnicity, has threatened to cut off all assistance to the Twa and their organisations if they continue to consider themselves as a distinct people. In 2004 the Rwandan Justice Ministry refused to grant legal status to the Twa-rights NGO Communauté des Autochtones Rwandaises (CAURWA) unless it stopped identifying the Twa as Rwanda's first inhabitants, and stopped referring to Twa people. In April 2006, the Secretary General of the Rwandan Ministry of Justice explained to IRIN News, 'Such ethnic divisions have only caused conflicts between the people of this country... It is now time to pass over these petty differences and pursue the goal of national unity that will benefit everyone in Rwanda.' In 2007, CAURWA was forced to change its name, as the government refused to budge on the issue of the renewing the charity licence, until it had dropped the word 'indigenous' from its title.

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