

Power, politics, and authority in Rwanda: a people's perspective

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Introduction

Academic discourse on authority in Rwanda focuses on the role and actions of the state. The relationship between authorities and the people is often presented as one sided. Non-elite Rwandans are presented as passive victims.

Objective: The goal of this research project is to challenge the mainstream discourse on authority in Rwanda. It aims to give a voice to the non-elite Rwandans who have so often been stripped of their agency – and in doing so, providing an entirely new perspective on a popular topic.

Research question How did non-elite Rwandans perceive and interact with authorities from 1960 to 1990?

Hypothesis: Rwandans had more complex forms of engagement with authorities than often believed.

Methodology: This research conducted a qualitative analysis of 10 interviews. See section 2: *Methodology*.

The research produced insightful and valuable results. Some of the findings gathered are listed below.

Politics was for the elites

Many Rwandans felt administration and politics did not play a major role in their lives; excluding periods of conflict and institutional barriers. Politics was seldom discussed in the community due to fear, ignorance or indifference. It was seen as being for the authorities – not something peasants should concern themselves with.

There was a hierarchy of authority

During both the First and Second Republics, there existed clear power hierarchies, which were reflected in the governments' administrative structures. See *figure 3*

Not all followed the rules

Authorities always had the last words. Theoretically, non-elite Rwandans were subject to the orders and decisions imposed from above. However, sometimes rules and orders were neither obeyed nor enforced.

High authorities bred conflict

High-authorities were perceived as the source of conflict. Changes in power and infighting among elites often had negative impacts on the community. Regional favoritism, access to education and other factors provoked ill-will and social tensions.

Local-authorities resolved conflicts

Non-elite Rwandans would go to local authorities if they had a problem, such as disputes over land ownership. An individual would begin by contacting the lowest authority (i.e. the counsellor or cell members). If that authority figure was unable to resolve the conflict, it would pass to their superior et cetera. See *figure 3*.

High-authorities

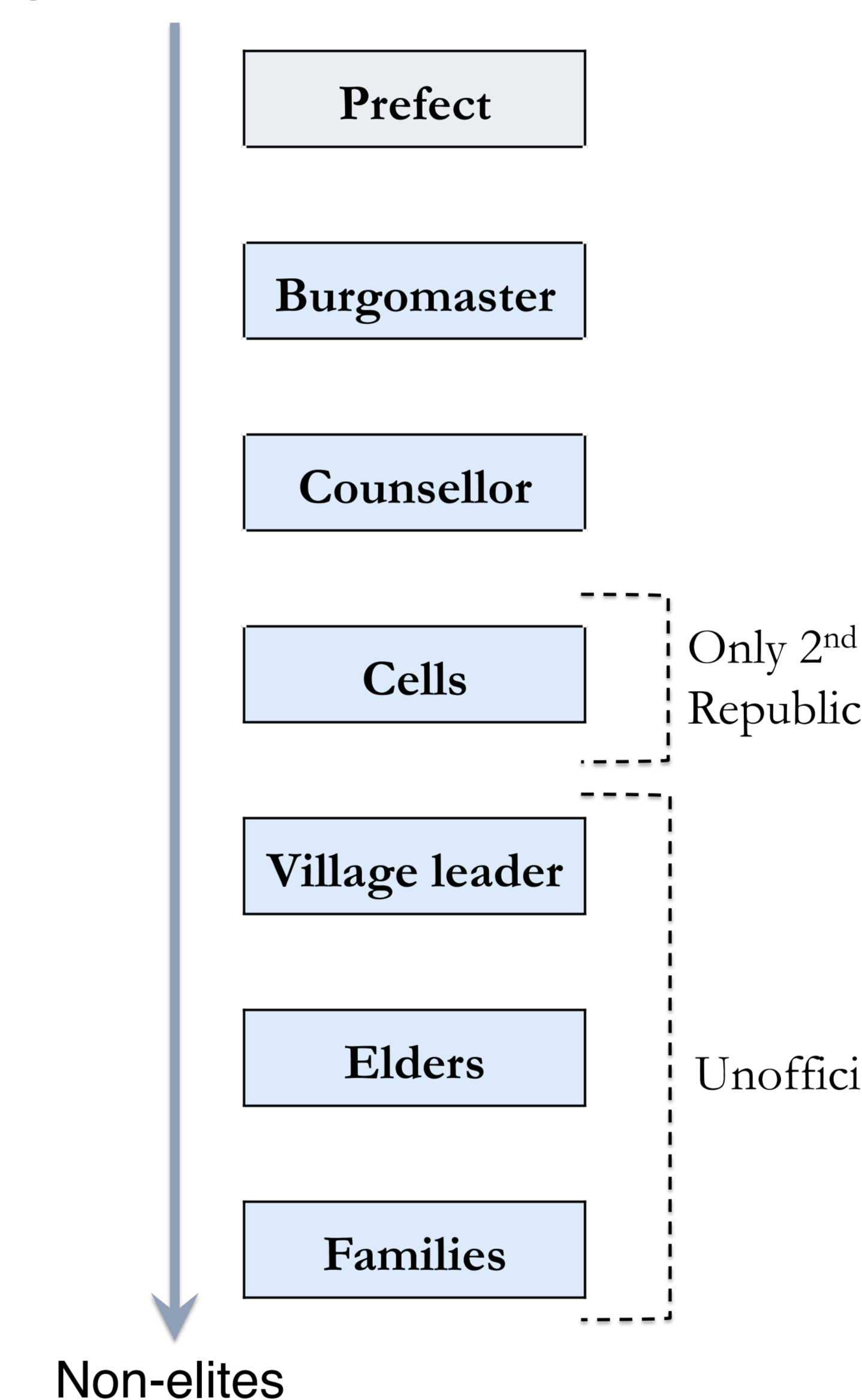


Figure 3

Local authorities were messengers

Non-elite Rwandans rarely interacted with high-authorities; exceptions included rate visits and national celebrations. Orders and messages were passed via the administrative hierarchy. Consequently, local authorities served as the point of communication between high-authorities and non-elite Rwandans. See *figure 3*.

Other sources of authority existed

Lower-authorities were not the only actors with the power to make decisions in the community. Elders and village leaders often possessed considerable influence and families could make decisions among themselves. Some local authorities even consulted the community when making a decision..

Historical context

1959	The Hutu Revolution.
1960	The abolishment of the monarchy.
1961	Rwanda gains independence.
	Gregoire Kayibanda, from the Parmehutu party, becomes President.
1973	Juvénal Habyarimana overthrows Kayibanda and creates the MRND party.
1978	Rwanda becomes a one-party state.
1990	Introduction of multi-partysim (Eriksson, 1996)



Figure 2

Sources and references:

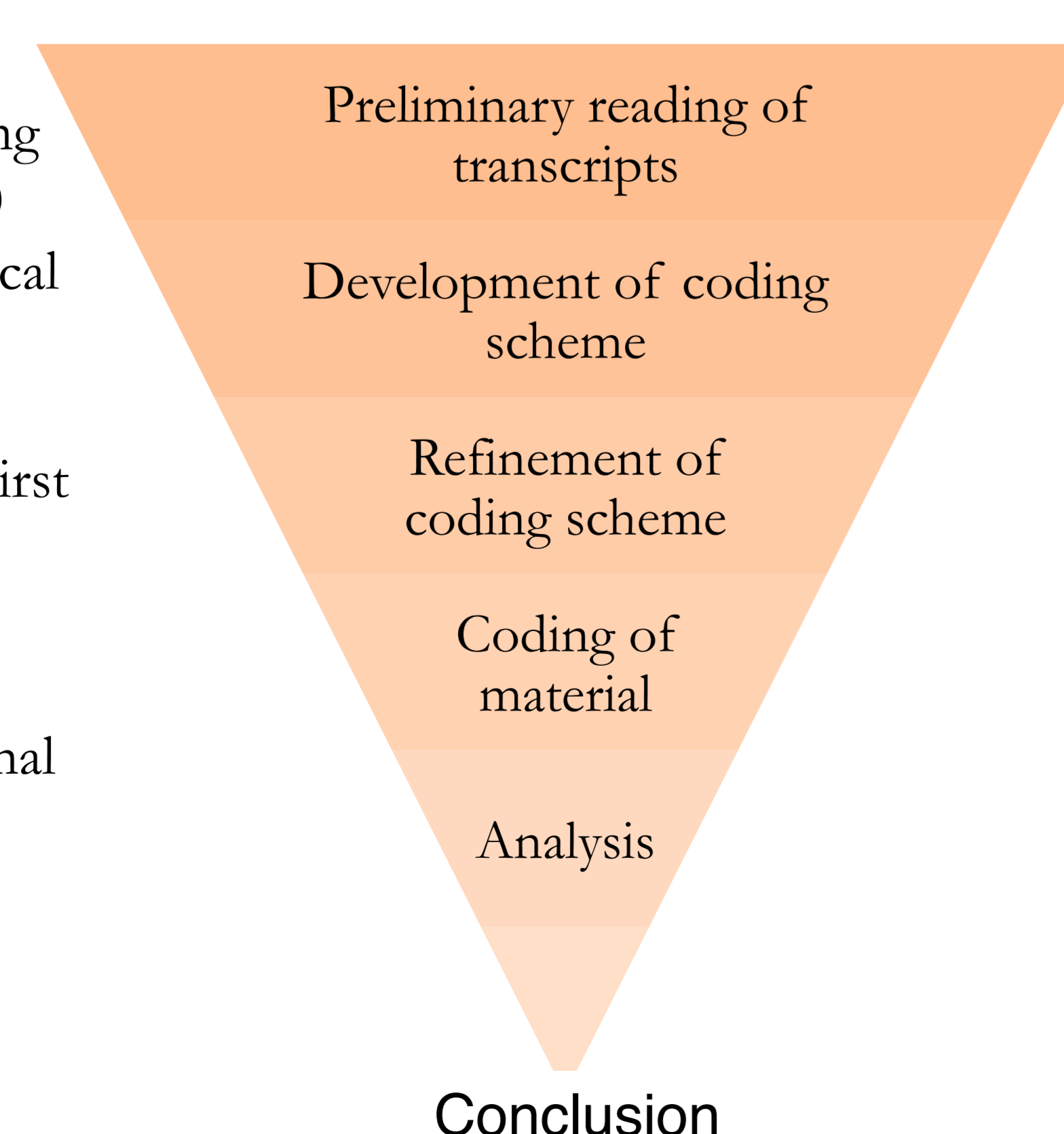
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Figure 1

Methodology

The research involved the coding and analysis of 10 interviews with local Rwandans who personally experienced the First and Second Republics. For confidentiality reasons, no personal details will be provided.



Conclusion

The research results support the project hypothesis. The research shows that non-elite Rwandans' relationship with authority was diverse, nuanced, and multi-faceted.

Non-elite Rwandans did not interact with all authorities in the same way. How authorities were perceived depended on their position in the administrative hierarchy. While high-authorities were a source of conflict and ill-will in the community, local authorities could be a source of stability and order. Although politics and administration arguably had significant impacts on the lives of Rwandans, many did not perceive this as being the case. Politics was seen as being exclusively for authorities.

The findings of this research are important because they subvert the belief that authority and relations to authority in Rwanda are defined by violence and ethnic conflict. It presents an alternative view that opens doors for other insights into the complexities of power relations and historical narratives. It will deepen and enrich academia's perception and understanding of the country as a whole.

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