

Genocide and identity: Stereotyping, 'othering' and violence in Rwanda

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Abstract

In 1994, over a million Tutsi and moderate Hutu were brutally killed in Rwanda during a three month long genocide. Another million Rwandans died in refugee camps and unrest in the Democratic Republic of Congo over the following few years. Since then, the world has sought to understand what happened. Due to the fact that the conflict in Rwanda seems to centre around ethnic identity, one attempt at understanding what happened has been through exploring Rwanda's identity politics. This paper will explore identity politics in Rwanda historically and through to the present. It will argue that in a society in recovery, what is needed is fluid and dynamic conceptions of identity, as opposed to fixed and rigid identity categories. Suggestions will be made in terms of how identity politics might be more positively reconstructed to allow for movement in identity conceptions. It will draw from my PhD research which included ethnographic data collected in Rwanda between 2005 and 2009.

Introduction

In 1994, over a million Tutsi and moderate Hutu were brutally killed in Rwanda during a three month long genocide. Another million Rwandans died in refugee camps and unrest in the Democratic Republic of Congo over the following few years. Since then, the world has sought to understand what happened. Due to the fact that the conflict in Rwanda seemed to centre around ethnic identity, one attempt at understanding what happened has been through exploring Rwanda's identity politics.

The primary premise of this paper is that the more fluid identity conceptions are, the less likely violence is to occur. Static, fixed identity categories that hold with them stereotyping and 'othering' tend to be at the root of violence. This paper will explore identity politics in Rwanda historically and through to the present and suggest ways in which identity politics might be more positively reconstructed, referring to the work of Richard Jenkins and Harri Englund. It will draw from my PHD research which included ethnographic data collected in Rwanda between 2005 and 2009.

Background

In terms of the development of identity politics in Rwanda, both the influence of outsiders, such as early explorers, missionaries and colonialists, and the influence of political and

social events within Rwanda and of Rwandan leaders, impacted the formation of Hutu and Tutsi identities. Not only have Hutu and Tutsi become divisive identities, but during the genocide the stereotype pervaded that being Tutsi was superior to being Hutu. Both Hutu and Tutsi speak the same language and seem to share the same culture and yet for a significant portion of Rwandan history the differences between these two groups meant far more than that which they shared.

Hutu and Tutsi have been described in terms of tribe, caste, class, occupation, social identity and ethnic group. Historical investigation reveals to us that the terms Hutu and Tutsi were relatively fluid prior to colonialism and probably referred to wealth rather than distinct tribes or races. Alison Des Forges, who was a researcher with *Human Rights Watch*, discusses how the majority of Rwandans were agriculturalists, with a small number of pastoralists (1999, 31). She argues that over time the pastoralists, who became the governing elite, became more clearly defined and began to think of themselves as superior to the many agriculturalists. The word 'Tutsi' thus referred to one's wealth and status, which was measured in terms of cattle owned, and 'Hutu' came to refer to the masses of ordinary people (1999, 32). However, they did not become fixed categories and different geographical areas operated under different rules and norms.

Part of the discussion of what the terms 'Hutu' and 'Tutsi' stand for has to do with whether these groups are of separate origin or not. For those that perceive Hutu, Tutsi and Twa to be distinctive groups with distinctive origins, it is assumed that the Twa, being pygmoid, were the earliest inhabitants of Rwanda; the Hutu, of Bantu origin, travelled up from the south perhaps some two thousand years ago and that the Tutsi were possibly a southern Ethiopian tribe who immigrated into Rwanda around the fifteenth century or several centuries before this. Some of these early accounts support the theory of a peaceful migration with Tutsi winning the Hutu over through a complex cattle relationship whereas others argue for a conquest model, saying that the relationship between Hutus and the Tutsi invaders differed by region.

Interestingly, historical accounts of Rwanda written after 1994 carefully avoid stating the origin of the Tutsi. This is largely because early European anthropologists, carrying with them their Eurocentric racism, believed that the Tutsi were the descendents of the Biblical Ham, a race closer to Europeans than the Bantu Hutus. With their stereotypical tall, thin features, as opposed to the 'short and stocky' Hutu, Tutsi were seen by the Europeans as being a superior race (Maquet, 1961, Lemarchand, 1970). Current writers on the Rwandan situation argue that it is this 'Hamite myth', based on the origin of the Tutsi, which has played

a significant role in influencing ethnic division and even genocide. Thus, writers after 1994 have more to say on the danger of the 'Hamitic hypothesis', as Christopher Taylor terms it, than speculating as to the actual origins of the Tutsi (Taylor, 2001).

Finding in Rwanda a well-advanced, complex state structure, colonialists concluded that the reigning Tutsi monarchy could not be Bantu. From this came the further conclusion that in the hierarchy of superiority, Tutsi would rank just under the Europeans themselves, followed by the Hutu and under them the Twa. Along with this hypothesis was the implied racial separateness of Hutu and Tutsi. Although Hutu and Tutsi shared the same culture, language and religion, it was concluded that Tutsi must have infiltrated Rwanda from the north and subjugated the Hutu.

Taylor discusses how John Henning Speke, one of the explorers looking for the source of the Nile, was the first to develop the theory of the Hamites as being the ones to bring civilization to Africa (2001, 59). According to this theory, black Caucasians from the Middle East moved through Ethiopia (where they were called the Galla-Hamites), through Uganda (where they were called the Hima) to Rwanda where they were called Tutsi. All subsequent historians and anthropologists took this as their foundational knowledge. Taylor writes how many early anthropologists seemed to agree that, "the Hamites were not Negroes, they were more intelligent than other Africans, and they were physically more attractive" (2001, 60). Further, Tutsi were described as being "intelligent and attractive, but rather frail; they were destined for governance. Hutu were stocky, coarser featured, but not overly intelligent; physical strength made them suitable for agricultural labour" (2001, 60). Catholic missionaries then taught Rwandans these theories as they taught them to read and write.

This is how relatively fluid identity conceptions prior to colonialism became fixed and rigid ethnic categories through the intervention of the colonialists. During the colonial period, all Rwandans were issued with identity cards stating their ethnic affiliation so that the movements between Hutu and Tutsi, and the meaning of the terms, could not longer fluctuate but became divisive and, ultimately, a source of violence.

Stereotyping, 'othering' and pre-genocide Rwanda

The affects of the stereotyping and 'othering' that resulted from the Hamitic hypothesis were very present in Rwanda prior to the 1994 genocide. Rwandans I interviewed described how Rwanda in the 1990s was a harmonious country, but the dynamics of inferiority and superiority in identity politics continued, as the following two stories, one from a Hutu and the other from a Tutsi, illustrate. Jean Paul, a Hutu student, recalled an incident from his youth

that made him aware of his ethnic identity, although at that stage it still wasn't a clear concept (Personal interview, December, 2007). His sister was sitting at the dinner table with some of their friends. The older brother of these friends, on seeing Jean Paul's sister at the table, said, "I don't want to share food with this *ikipingo*" and went to eat his food elsewhere. Later, when some strangers came to eat with them, Jean Paul's sister said that she did not want to eat with the *ikipingo*, thinking that the term meant 'stranger'. There was an awkward silence. Apparently, *ikipingo* did not refer to a stranger, as Jean Paul's sister had assumed it did, but was rather a derogatory term for a Hutu.

Later, in a conversation with Terese, a Tutsi, I asked her about the meaning of *ikipingo* and she said it meant 'disagreeable', in that it was disagreeable for Hutu to be there; for Tutsi to have to share their space with Hutu (Personal interview, Pietermaritzburg, December, 2007). She also describes how when growing up, adults around her would often speak derogatively of Hutu. If one of the children were greedy, unpleasant or dirty the adults would say, "stop acting like a Hutu." But as a child, Terese says she didn't know that there were actually people that were Hutus. She thought it was just a word. In her community in Tanzania, most Rwandan refugees were Tutsi and were very proud of being Tutsi. In the vicinity were also Burundian Hutu, who, according to her, were quite unpleasant, stealing and behaving badly. At this point she didn't know there were Rwandan Hutus and assumed there were only what she perceived to be unpleasant Burundians.

These are anecdotal examples of what the literature describes again and again as having been pervasive in terms of identity relations in Rwanda prior to the genocide. Although Rwandan society was relatively peaceful and seemingly stable, rigid ethnic categorization accompanied by negative stereotyping and 'othering' existed.

Stereotyping, 'othering' and genocide

Echoes of the Hamitic hypothesis, and its accompanying stereotypes, were constantly heard during the genocide. An early obvious reference to this was by the ruling party's vice-president, Dr Leon Mugesera, in 1992, when he said, "They [the accomplices of the RPF] belong to Ethiopia and we are going to find them a shortcut to get there by throwing them in the Nyabarongo river. I must insist on this point. We have to act. Wipe them all out!" (Taylor, 2001, 80). The two strong messages here – that the Tutsi are other and that they are from somewhere else – formed a central theme of the propaganda campaign. Coupled with this idea is the one of Hutus as being the original inhabitants of Rwanda, who were cruelly subjugated by Tutsi invaders. In the early 1990s MRND (the ruling party) supporters were often heard putting forward the following version of history:

“We Hutu are Bantus. Although the Twa were here first, when we arrived we lived in peace with them. We cleared the land and farmed it. They made pots or hunted in the forests. The first kings in Rwanda were Hutu but the Tutsi say they were Tutsi. The Tutsi used their cattle to trick Hutu into doing their work for them. Then the Tutsi managed to conquer one Hutu kingdom. When the Europeans came, they helped the Tutsi conquer the rest of our lands” (Taylor, 2001, 83).

Darryl Li's analysis of radio propaganda during the genocide shows how the killing was repeatedly described in terms of work euphemisms, relating the killings to community service, which normally involved cleaning the vegetation alongside roads (2004, 11). Taylor describes how the killers would speak of clearing away the ‘tall trees’, which played on the stereotype of Tutsi height. The nation-state was referred to as a garden and people were to clear the ‘weeds’, and not just the ‘tall weeds’ but also the ‘shoots’, which referred to the children (Taylor, 2001, 142).

The Hamitic hypothesis influenced the extremist Tutsi as well. Prior to the genocide a supporter of the Rwandan Patriotic Front said to Taylor, “We Tutsi were once the nobles in this land and the Hutu were our slaves. Hutu do not have the intelligence to govern. Look at what they have done to this country in the last thirty years” (2001, 85)

Taylor describes how Tutsi extremists have used the Hamitic hypothesis to claim intellectual superiority and Hutu extremists to insist upon the foreign origins of Tutsi, and the autochthony of Hutu. Both are reproducing a colonial pattern that “essentializes ethnic difference, justifies political domination by a single group, and nurtures a profound thirst for redress and vengeance on the part of the defavourized group” (2001, 57).

The Hamitic hypothesis formed a powerful part of the genocidal ideology and it has been difficult to leave behind. After the genocide, the Rwandan government needed to develop a new history, a new story to counter that of the extremist Hutu Power. The primary focus of the new government was to reinvent a Rwanda without ethnic categories. The presiding message of the new government was and still is, “There is no Hutu and Tutsi, there are only Rwandans” (Des Forges, 1999). Policies and laws have been put in place to help Rwandans move on from ethnic categories to a united Rwandan identity.

Stereotyping and ‘othering’ in Rwanda today

But has the message of national unity through the discarding of ethnic categories been successful? Stereotyping and 'othering' seems to still be embedded in the mindsets of some Rwandans today. During an interview in 2006, Francois, who has a Hutu father and a Tutsi mother, said the following:

"I don't want to lie now, I'm going to tell you as a Christian, mostly the Tutsi they are manipulative. Secondly, Hutu, they are stupid. I say this because Hutu sometimes don't know what they want ... I don't know how to put this, Hutus have a reaction now and it's over. You will never see a Tutsi being angry now. They keep quiet and you think everything is fine and after a while something happens. Hutu get angry quickly. Tutsi try to be clever, which doesn't mean they are clever but they think they are which adds to their arrogance".

It is clear that for Francois, who has never found a sense of belonging with either Hutu or Tutsi, each group has distinct characteristics, neither of which he feels a part. He explains these stereotypes in terms of an example:

"A clear example is how one person was killed and everyone picked up machete and started killing other people. It doesn't make sense. But look how Tutsi are killing Hutu now. They are killing them slowly, by not allowing them to study, for example. They think they are clever but ultimately they will fail. The one group uses anger, the other uses [cunning]".

The ethnic stereotypes of the Hamitic hypothesis have carried over through the generations and making it difficult for Rwandans to reinvent a new identity that transcends this powerful narrative. Although national rhetoric encourages a united Rwandan identity that moves beyond ethnicity, making this a reality remains a challenge.

The excerpts from the interview reflect what is evident in the literature, that the stereotypes and ideology of the Hamitic hypothesis remain functional in Rwandan society today. Although many efforts are being made to counter these deeply entrenched self and other identifications, they will not disappear overnight and it may take generations for Rwandans to internalize a more inclusive, shared Rwandan identity beyond ethnicity. Ignoring the prevalence of ethnic stereotyping is probably not a helpful solution.

Alternative identity politics

In this section of the paper, some ways in which identity might be reconceptualised in the context of a society in recovery will be explored through the work of Richard Jenkins and Harri Englund.

Richard Jenkins explores the dynamics of ethnic identity from an anthropological perspective and gives some insights that may be helpful in the Rwandan context. His model emphasises the fact that identity is not static or inherent but rather dynamic and changing (2003, 13). He argues that it changes in the process of interacting with others and events around us. The premise of his model is that differences between groups become significant only if they are significant to the actors themselves. In other words, differences between groups are not inherently problematic but become problematic when those involved begin to experience them as problematic. These differences can thus be described as 'imagined'. But just because they are imagined, Jenkins stresses, this doesn't mean that they are not significant to the actors themselves, significant enough to die for or to kill over (Jenkins, 2003, 19). Jenkins makes clear that ethnic identity, although not primordial, is nevertheless a primary aspect of self identity through the process of socialization. Thus ethnic identity cannot easily be 'shaken off'.

Another premise of this model is that ethnic identification happens at the boundaries between groups. It is in the interactions on the boundary of 'us' and 'them' at which groups are defined. Jenkins argues that we define ourselves in terms of what we are that the 'other' isn't or in terms of what we are not compared to what the 'other' is (2003, 20). Sandra Wallman (1978, 1979, 1986) adds to this, saying that 'othering', or emphasizing 'their' difference happens to enhance 'our' identity 'for purposes of organizations or identification' (Jenkins, 2003, 19). Ethnicity, she says, happens at the boundary of 'us', in contact or confrontation or contrast with 'them'. Boundaries change as actors' understandings of themselves or the other changes (2003, 20). Ethnicity is thus "transactional, shifting and essentially impermanent" and ethnic boundaries are always two-sided. What becomes significant is how these boundaries are manipulated for various purposes (2003, 20).

Jenkins' model suggests that identity is constructed and negotiated on a daily basis. Rather than identifying key factors that differentiate Hutu from Tutsi genetically or biologically, this model would suggest that that which differentiates one ethnicity from another would depend on *how Hutu and Tutsi themselves define and describe those differences*. Furthermore, this

model suggests that those factors that actors might emphasise as differentiating themselves today may not be the same as they used in the past or will use in the future. This is very helpful in understanding the shifting relationship between Hutu and Tutsi.

Jenkins' model also stresses the influence of those in power and of historical and political events. Applying this to the Rwandan situation, we can see how the racial identities imposed by the colonialists became internalized so that during that period of history to be Hutu did mean to be inferior and to be Tutsi did mean to be superior for all those involved (2003, 58). However, that does not mean that to be Tutsi *always* mean being superior. Yet when we hear stereotyping and 'othering' in the discourse of young people today we need to be aware that this is a deep and complex dynamic that needs to be addressed.

So how can deeply embedded identities be shifted to more healthy self and other conceptualizations? Jenkins suggests that it happens in the dialogue that takes place between self, other and one's broader society. Labeling and exclusion are at the heart of creating the boundaries between groups. When a particular group feels labeled and excluded, the stereotypes that define self and other become more defined. In the case of Rwanda, one might argue that labeling and exclusion continue when one group is labeled collectively responsible for genocide and another group collectively the victim. To move beyond ethnic stereotypes and 'othering' one would need to find more inclusive ways of talking about identity, but also more inclusive ways of talking about the genocide and the past.

Jenkins speaks of nominal and virtual identities. He suggests a way in which the tension between national identity, personal autonomy and a sense of community can be understood. Nominal identity refers to that which is titled (eg: Hutu, Tutsi, Rwandan, etc) and virtual identity refers to that which is lived. He argues that these overlap but aren't always the same thing. The nominal is less likely to change than the virtual, which remains dynamic. By freezing identity categories in terms of the nominal, the natural processes of virtual identity are hampered and disallowed to grow into something new. He argues that identity is always in flux and emerging. Static identity categories hamper the natural development towards different ways of engaging one another, which is necessary in societies recovering from violent conflict.

In a related theme, Harri Englund suggests a shift in emphasis from identity categories (either individual or group) to the relations between categories, between communities, between individuals and between groups; that more important than the discrete groups is the

fluid movement between them. In the African context, in particular, people rarely move within single, static identity categories but rather within fluid networks of self and other identity. Englund argues for complex and multiple rather than simple, narrowly defined identities. He suggests that in many post-colonial African states, a common feature is that each person accommodates multiple identities. He argues that the danger of seeing groups as discrete (separate units from one another) is that they can easily be manipulated to foster intolerance, hatred and violence. "Other groups and communities are unreservedly alien, cut off from the fabric of a moral society or, if not spontaneously keeping their distance, severed by force". African leaders can then justify suppressing difference (for example, through suppressing minority or disadvantaged groups) in the name of national unity.

He argues that every community is a network of complex relations. Thus, rather than recognizing or acknowledging distinct communities of difference, one would acknowledge the relations that unite those groups, and to acknowledge these relations not only as something that is inserted between communities after they emerge, but as intrinsic to the very emergence of the communities. Englund suggests making relationships and connections the starting point of the politics of recognition. But this is difficult in a context where identity politics means having a specific, discrete identity and where every person is rooted in a particular culture. He argues that an alternative to discrete individuals, groups and communities pursuing their own agendas might involve looking at contemporary African ways of being such as "cosmopolitan citizenship, multiple post-colonial identities and cosmological ideas about the person and the self". Englund would argue that the complex network of relationships between identities, within a person and between people, is intrinsic to the living out of identities in the post-colonial African context.

Conclusion

This paper has described how Rwandan identity prior to colonialism was fluid but that with the onset of colonialism and the introduction of the Hamitic hypothesis identities became static and fixed which led to unimaginable violence. Prior to colonialism, ethnic identities tended to dynamically shift and merge into new conceptualizations. With colonialism, this natural development of identity was undermined as people were organized into either one or another single identity category. As Kenneth Harrow writes,

"The scenes of young [militia] butchering Tutsi women and children at various checkpoints [during the genocide] have been often narrated so as to arouse our horror at the killers: they are drunk, stoned, inhuman. Indeed, they might have been

all of the above, but instead of stopping with the simplistic notion that a man who drinks or smokes marijuana becomes a killer, we would do better to consider that what made possible the suppression of feelings that would normally inhibit such acts required the reinforcement of fantasies that functioned to turn other people into something other than humans, making them radically other, like the [militia] themselves. The people who killed became, themselves, immune to the propositions of intersubjectivity and shared histories, and were able to channel their fantasies into rigid channels that ended any other possibilities of energetic relations with others” (2005, 17).

Today, there is the opportunity to allow for more helpful, unifying identities to emerge. Central for this to happen is for dialogue to take place around issues of identity and to allow multiple identity categories to co-exist. In the case of Rwanda, there is a particular need for this as Rwandans grapple with integrating deeply internalized ethnic identities with a sense of national unity. This paper would argue that healthy identities develop not through insisting on fixed identity categories but through allowing multiple identities, such as ethnicity, family, clan and nationality to dynamically develop through dialogue and debate.

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