

Ethnicity and genocide in rwanda



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Tracing the origins of a genocide is a treacherous undertaking. If simply recording the 'facts' can be difficult, due to the chaotic and brutal disregard of human existence and culture, then tracing the social, cultural and political origins/causes is highly problematic. If the interpreter chooses to trace these origins to the distant past, by considering peculiar cultural developments and tensions then he/she can be accused of absolving those who were actively involved in the genocide of the responsibility that should be attributed to them. If on the other hand, the interpreter chooses merely to concentrate on the motivations of those involved then this can be at the expense of a broader understanding of the circumstances that enabled such motivations to flourish. This dilemma certainly confronts efforts to explain the most notorious genocide in human history, in Germany during the second world war. Hannah Arendt for example, asked us, disturbingly, to think of Eichman as just a bureaucrat trying to do the best for his career and family – as a creation of the dark side of modernity.

In attempting to explain a more recent, equally brutal, genocide in Rwanda in 1994 we are once again confronted by the interpretive dilemma described above. In the case of Rwanda the issue for those attempting to explain why almost 1 million people were murdered in the space of just a few months, has been the extent to which ethnicity was the decisive factor. Was it ethnic tension and rivalry that erupted, horrifically, into the mass killing of a minority ethnic group by another majority ethnic group? If so then how did such viscous ethnic tension emerge? Was it an artificial creation of colonial rule, that was very likely to eventually end in violent conflict? Or were ethnic tensions between the Hutu and Tutsi the deliberate construction of power

groups bent on the annihilation of their enemies, their competitors for power. And to what extent were these tensions class based rather than ethnic? In the following essay I shall show how there is more at stake in assessing the contribution of ethnicity to the genocide in Rwanda than the *degree* to which ethnicity was a factor. Moreover, it is very clear that ethnicity played a part but the key issue is when, who, how and for what purpose was ‘ethnic’ division created? Our answers to these questions will lead us to the very meaning of the ethnicities themselves.

Ethnicity and Genocide

Before we can begin to address the particular case of Rwanda however we should clarify what will be meant by both ethnicity and genocide. The term ethnicity is usually employed to refer to the identity of a group of people who share a particular geography, language, history, religion, habits and customs that can be distinguished from other such groups. Whether this identity is ‘imaginary or real’, as Obi Zgwanda notes, is irrelevant. What matters is that there is a perception of ethnic differences and that this perception guides the actions and interactions of those who hold to them. It is important also to note here that ethnicity is a social identity that is not necessarily confined by, or the product of, precise geographical boundaries. Indeed Africa is a good example of a region that consists of many ethnicities that pre-date the establishment of geographical boundaries. Moreover, just because a certain social identity is not geographically demarcated against another social identity, it’s other, does not mean that the social identity in question is any less describable as ethnic (Igwarra, 1995: 7)

The term genocide requires a much more formal definition. This is because there often seems to be some confusion between killing that is motivated by ethnic hatred and the deliberate, planned attempt to eliminate a certain ethnic group – which is what we shall understand to be genocide. The distinction is important because it is much easier to understand the socio-historical causes of violence between ethnic groups than it is to trace the socio-historical legacy that led to genocide. In other words, there may exist ethnic tensions or competing ethnicities but it is a big step to then understand them as the key contributing factor in genocide. And once we recognise that genocide is planned and deliberate then we also have to take into account the motivations of the planners of the genocide. In other words, we need to consider the extent to which ethnicity was manipulated by actors bent on the paranoid accumulation of power and wealth.

Hutu and Tutsi as ethnicities?

Hutu and Tutsi are the two main ethnic groupings in Rwanda. But are they really distinct ethnic groupings. After all, they share the same language and customs and are not divided by religion either. Indeed, they also share the same geography. The Hutu, who are the majority group, have been historically distinguished, most significantly, merely by their occupation as farmers of the land whereas Tutsi are mainly cattle farmers. To be sure this is an important difference, in that ownership of cattle has traditionally been thought of as the chief measure of status. There are some who believe that Tutsi and Hutu can be distinguished also by appearance but then there are others still who believe that this is mythical, a social imagination of former Tutsi rule which explains why they are thought to be taller. In any case, the

pre-twentieth century history of Tutsi and Hutu suggest that the two groups were different not as ethnicities as such but as two layers of a caste system.

This would perhaps explain why prior to the twentieth century the Hutu and Tutsi coexisted relatively peacefully; certainly if the cultural and economic hierarchy between Tutsi and Hutu was internalised as a natural order within the social identities of the two groupings. Indeed, to describe the Hutu and Tutsi as ethnicities may indeed be a Eurocentric way of classifying the differences between the two groups that wants to divide up the world into distinct ethnicities, much in the way that nations are divided up. To put the point differently, it is rather like understanding the middle and working classes in Britain as separate ethnicities. To conclude this section, if the genocide carried out by Hutu against Tutsi is to be understood in terms of ethnicity then the ethnicity we are referring to must surely be a recent creation and therefore, perhaps less decisive as a factor?

Colonialism and the construction of ethnicity

It is now widely recognised that colonial rule of Africa, and other parts of the world, created tensions that otherwise might not have existed. There are two key reasons for this effect. Firstly, the dividing up of Africa by European powers in the 19th and early 20th century created artificial boundaries which subsequently became states, and which would later become the subject of dispute and violent conflict. Secondly, and more significantly in the case of Rwanda colonialism imposed what is called the settler/native dialectic. The settler/native dialectic did not just impose a hierarchy it established an altered consciousness in which social identities were relative to the 'superiority' of the colonist (Mamdani, 2001). Moreover, consent to colonial

rule was imposed not just through force but through a kind of cultural assimilation in which the 'native' was encouraged to aspire to the cultural and economic superiority of the 'settler'. This surely had the effect of heightening tensions between groups that were privileged or marginalised within this dialectic – thus feeding a key ingredient of ethnicity, namely otherness (Mamdani, 2001)

German control of Rwanda up until the first world war certainly followed the logic of colonialism described above. Throughout German occupation the dominance of the Tutsi was further institutionalised through administrative and economic structures. And the enforcement of a tax regime meant that the Tutsi were both partly responsible for and beneficiaries of the collection and allocation of revenue. However, it was Belgian colonialism that had the most significant impact on relations between Hutu and Tutsi, and the social construction of ethnic identity in Rwanda. There are several key factors here. Firstly, after taking control of the colony after world war one, the Belgian authorities introduced formal ethnic identification. Every Rwandan was forced to carry identity cards stating their ethnic identity, i. e Hutu or Tutsi. Placed alongside the continued support for the Tutsi elite and the explicit belief that the Tutsi were superior to the Hutu, physically and culturally, this surely had the effect of polarising the 'ethnic' contrast between the two groups (Igwarra, 1995: 46) Worse still, the Belgian authorities attempted to make Rwanda into a profitable colony and thus enforced a much harsher regime than under the Germans. Since much of the administration of this regime was carried out by the Tutsi an actual dynamic of tension was set in place that was to unfold throughout the twentieth century.

The Belgian colonisers certainly helped to ensure, albeit unintentionally, that this dynamic became conflictual and violent. In the 1950's signs of unrest amongst the Hutu population in reaction to their oppressed condition led the Belgian authorities to introduce a greater measure of equality between the Hutu and Tutsi. Moreover the growing confidence and deepened collective consciousness of the Hutu eventually resulted in a bloody overthrow by the Hutu of the Tutsi regime in 1959. From 1962 onwards the Hutu reversed the Tutsi dominance, often just as brutally as the regime that it replaced. By the 1990's the Hutu and Tutsi were divided, at least, by divergent collective memories of the past, or in other words by conflicting ethnic identities.

By way of conclusion to our summary of the effects of colonialism, we can say that the colonial control of Rwanda clearly established tensions that might not otherwise have existed, which had the effect of strengthening the ethnic self-consciousness of the Hutu and Tutsi (Mamdani, 2001). Though we have not yet established the degree to which ethnicity contributed to the genocide in Rwanda, it is clear that the tensions that were present in the early 1990's were ethnic ones, even if they were only recently created. By this time the perceived cultural differences between the Hutu and Tutsi were not mere economic.

The Genocide

It is one thing to establish that the genocide occurred against a background of decades of ethnic strife, but quite another to claim this strife was the decisive factor in the genocide. To claim that ethnicity was the decisive factor in the genocide is perhaps to suppose that the genocide was spontaneous, that it was the rising to the surface of ethnic injustice and

hatred – whose will was carried out by the militia who slaughtered so many Tutsi, in such a short space of time. But perhaps this is what the perpetrators of the genocide would like us to believe. Perhaps it would be more accurate to claim, following the definition of Genocide outlined above, that the genocide was deliberate and planned and that the ethnic hatred, and thus the particular ethnicity that played a part was also deliberately cultivated for the purpose of carrying out genocide. There are several key factors here.

Firstly whilst its scale was unprecedented in Rwanda, the genocide arguably began sometime before 1994. During the late 1980's and early 1990's a series of programs were carried out. These were smaller scale brutal killing expeditions by Hutu militia, coordinated by the Hutu government, most probably in preparation for genocide on a much greater scale (Freeman, 1998). The Hutu government appeared to have arrived at the conclusion that the surest way to permanently secure its power base was the elimination of the Tutsi. The rhetoric of the regime during this period certainly seems to confirm this. But the Hutu suppression of the Tutsi during this period, under the leadership of Habyarimana, was not simply motivated by the desire to ethnically cleanse. Even though viscous ethnocentric rhetoric was employed the Hutu government were perhaps more fearful of the consequences of the pressure that was being brought on them by external powers for democratic reform and thus the inclusion of the Tutsi. The programs then, and the eventual genocide may be seen as an attempt to eliminate any threat to its power base before it was required to relent to pressure for democratic reform. Indeed, the introduction of democratic reform during the early 1990's only further strengthened the Hutu governments cause. More press

freedom and the establishment of new political parties only led to more pro-Hutu and more anti-Tutsi rhetoric. This rhetoric was also more specifically targeted against the Arusha accords which were supposed to establish a power-sharing arrangement with the Tutsi. To be sure, the chances for the success of the accords was diminished also by the invasions between 1990-93 of the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) a Tutsi led militia force based in Uganda. However the fear amongst the Hutu elite that if the accords were realised they would lose their cultural and political positions was more decisively a factor in their racialisation of Rwanda politics during the period before the genocide.

The extent to which the Rwandan genocide was planned and thus the result of a power struggle rather, merely, than ethnicity, is evidenced by the events that led up to the genocide in the months before. On April 6th 1994 a plane carrying the president was shot down by a missile, killing everyone on board. But in the same day of the attack, Hutu militia were out on patrol checking the identities of all passers by – if they were Tutsi they were brutally murdered with machete's (Freeman, 1998: 49). The killing that ensued then was immediate and on a mass scale during a period of just 3 months. Estimates of the number of Tutsi killed ranged between 700, 000 and 1 million. The apparent suddenness of the genocide as well as the inaction of the international community should not however, disguise the significant and not well concealed evidence that the genocide was planned – even predictable. Indeed the attack on the presidents aeroplane is still shrouded in mystery. It is unclear who carried out the attack and some suspect that it may have been Hutu extremists concerned that the Hutu government would

relinquish some of its power base to the Tutsi. And it should also be noted that the genocide was not just targeted at Tutsi but Hutu moderates.

The relative absence of ethnicity as a factor in the summary above leaves out an important question however. How is it, if the genocide was a planned attempt by the Hutu elite to eliminate any potential threat to its power-base, that so many people participated in the genocide. However, only 10% of the Hutu population participated in the killings. The image that is often portrayed of the people killing their neighbours often obscures this statistic. It is true that Tutsi and Hutu lived in the same communities and spoke the same language and even married each other but one cannot make the further step that the genocide was the spontaneous eruption of ethnic hatred. Clearly, the events and origins of the genocide in Rwanda are highly contested. Indeed, it is important to include here the interpretation of the events offered by western governments and the western media. There is much evidence to suggest that both the U. S and France had the operational military capability to intervene rapidly and decisively to halt the genocide. Furthermore the shooting down of the presidents plane has never properly been investigated, either by the U. N, American or Belgian authorities.

Moreover Rwanda represents a massive failure on a number of fronts. The most blatant failure was clearly that of the United Nations for pathetically sending in peacekeeping troops that were merely able to stand by and watch the slaughter. Then there is the failure, and apparent inconsistency of the ‘ American empire’ to decisively intervene despite its interventions elsewhere. And there is also the failure to prevent the genocide, to do anything about the preparations for genocide. Indeed, Rwanda was actually viewed as a

model of development – of an example of the success of international development aid. This is despite the substantial use of international aid for the funding Hutu militia and the luxurious lifestyles of the Hutu elite. From the perspective of these failed actors, or non-actors, it is certainly much more convenient either to understand what happened in Rwanda as ‘civil war’ or to understand it as a sudden eruption of ethnic tensions that defy easy explanation. Curiously, by laying the blame for the genocide at the door of colonialism the cultural studies, post-colonial explanation for the genocide in Rwanda actually ends up allying itself with the former colonial powers who apparently ‘powerless’ to intervene.

Conclusion

Whilst ethnicity is clearly a factor in the genocide in Rwanda, we need to be careful the way in which and the degree to which attribute this factor. Firstly, historically the Tutsi and Hutu have been divided along class rather than ethnic lines. Their differences do not take the form of ethnic differences in the European sense of the term. Secondly, whilst the colonial intensification of tensions between the Hutu and Tutsi created a consciousness of ethnicity that might not otherwise have existed we should be careful when attempting to trace the specific and brutal act of genocide to the legacy of colonialism. Thirdly, the years, months, days and hours that preceded the genocide suggest that it was planned and thus not a sudden eruption of ethnic tension and hostilities as is sometimes implied.

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