

Causes of rwandan genocide essay sample

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In 1994, Rwanda, a tiny state in the great lakes region of east Africa, erupted in an orgy of mass murder of epic proportion. Within 100 days, between 800 000 to 1000 000 Tutsis and, to a lesser extent, moderate Hutus were systematically slaughtered by Hutu extremist in one of the worst atrocities since World War II. Originally, pundits and most media outlets fingered out tribal warfare stemming from continuing, long-term, chronic animosity as the cause of the conflict. However, punditry would later point at a multiplicity of causes as being behind the carnage.

That the violence amounted to genocide is indisputable; rather, what cries out for action is a wading through this verbiage of explanations for a more rational conceptualization of the ultimate cause or causes of the genocide. In this paper, the writer will present an analysis that involves the consideration of cultural and political factors as significant contributors to the genocide. At the same time, I will defend the thesis that while this components played a significant role in bringing about the Rwandan genocide, other component must be brought to bear for us to gain a fuller understanding of the genocide.

Rwanda History and Culture: Construction of the Tutsi-Hutu Dichotomy and Otherness and the Establishment of Tutsi dominance. To understand the role of cultural forces in the origination of the Rwanda genocide, or rather, how a culturally diffuse, non-differentiated people were ultimately aggregated under Hutu and Tutsi appellations and how a stringent dichotomy which ultimately gave rise to a stigmatized and stereotyped other was constructed with regards to these groups, one has to evoke Rwandan pre-colonial and colonial history. In this regard, the following can be said.

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In the beginning, Rwanda was settled by a group of cave-dwelling pygmies – the ancestors of a marginalized and disenfranchised tribe called Twa in present day Rwanda, the Hutus and Tutsis arrived later. According to conventions, Bantu-speaking Hutu horticulturalists were the first to migrate, coming from the south and west, while pastoralist Tutsis, migrated later from the east and north (Magnarella 2005, pp. 2). With time, the Tutsis and Hutus assimilated to such a degree that they spoke the same language, worshiped the same gods, intermarried freely and lived on the same hills and valleys sharing the same socio-political culture.

Because of the extensive nature of this mixing, ethnographers and historians share the view that Tutsis and Hutus are un-distinguishable ethnically (Gourevitch 1998, pp. 48). Despite the mixing, the Hutu-Tutsi appellations stuck. And as the Tutsis established a social, political and economic hegemony over the Hutus in the subsequent historical period, the two words acquired new meanings (i. e. Tutsi became synonymous with political and economic elite) as an exclusive dichotomy evolved. According to Gourevitch, the social schism was expedited after 1860 with the ascendancy of Mwami Kigeri Rwabugiri to the throne, a Tutsi (pp. 8-49).

Under Rwabugiri, the Rwandan state expanded and with time, this divinized king extended the strangled hold of the Tutsis on the Hutus – the regime was basically feudal: Hutus were the vassals while Tutsis were the aristocrats. However, status and identity could still be determined by factors such as clan, clientage, and military process, among others. Apparently and like Gourevitch reminds us, “ Hutu and Tutsi identities took definition only in

relationship to state power; as they did, the two groups inevitably developed their own distinctive cultures, or rather, set of ideas about themselves and one another (pp. 0). ”

Typically, these cultural concepts about group identities were generally framed as mutually opposing negatives: a Tutsi was what a Hutu was not and the converse. Since the core assumption behind stigma is that internal essence is revealed behind external physical archetypes – for Hutu, this logic would have it that they were brute-looking, dark-skinned, flat nosed, and pouched mouthed; for Tutsis, it was that they were lanky, narrow nosed, thin lipped and narrow chinned. That is to say, the Tutsis were Caucasian like while the Hutus were simian like.

Further, the Tutsis notions of cultural superiority were reflected in the diet and legal system. As the population increased, access to land, misery and abject poverty escalated among the Hutus. Indeed, and according to Pottier, the socio-economic and political divisions between the two groups had already ossified into a rigid caste-like system under-girded by a cultural outlook which rationalized Tutsis superiority by the time the colonialists arrived (Magnarella 2005, pp 3). German and Belgium Rwanda and the Accentuation of Ethnic Divide From 1894 to the end of the World War I, Rwanda was subsumed under German East Africa.

During their reign, the Germans sort to maintain the existing power structure and, as a result, ruled indirectly through the Tutsi monarchs who impressed them generally as different and more intelligent. In this way, the Hutus simply used their position to extend their hegemony over the Hutus.

According to Gourevitch (1998), by the time the League of Nations turned over the country to Belgium in 1924 as a spoil of war, The Hutu-Tutsi identities had coalesced into opposing ethnic identities and the Belgians made Tutsi dominance the cornerstone of their colonial policies (pp. 54).

For instance, the Belgians instituted a number of infrastructural and agricultural projects in order to profit from their colonial investments. To get cheap labor, they revived the traditional corvee system (a system of forced labour) and placed the Tutsi as the whip crackers. Indeed nothing exemplifies the ethnocentric divide between the two groups in Belgian Rwanda than this system of forced labor which had the Tutsis as the slave drivers and the Hutus as the vassals. To make matters worse, the Belgians introduced identity cards in 1933-1934 that indicated ethnic identity thus reinforcing the notion of Tutsi's racial superiority.

In the end, whatever was left of the idea of collective identity was finally killed-off and, like Gourevitch reminds us, there developed on either side of the Tutsi-Hutu divide mutually exclusionary discourses based on the competition claims of entitlement and injury (pp. 58). Independent Rwanda: the Establishment of a Hutu-centric State and the Beginnings of Low grade Genocide against Tutsis Looking back at this traumatizing period in the Hutu nation, one cannot ignore the fact that the historical oppression of the Hutus by the Tutsis must have scarred them in a lasting way.

In subsequent years, and as Belgium reversed its policy of discrimination in favour of the Hutu, the previous victim would be transformed into murderous champions of Hutu hegemony. As I have hinted in the foregoing passage,

Belgium changed its policy in favour of the Hutus in the late 50s. In 1957, Hutu intellectuals wrote the so-called Hutu manifesto in which they lambasted Tutsis historical socio-economic and political dominance and advocated for the establishment of a Hutu dominated state to correct this wrong (Magnarella 2005, pp 5).

Predictably, the Tutsi royalty rejected the manifesto. In 1959, pro-Hutu stalwarts engineered a revolt that resulted in bloody clashes between the two groups and the toppling of the Tutsi King. Beginning in 1960s, the Belgians started replacing Tutsi chiefs with Hutu, who immediately started to purge their domains of Tutsis. Appropriation of Tutsi land, mass murder and mass migration of the persecuted Tutsis into neighboring countries (Burundi) was the consequence.

Indeed, the history of Rwanda from the declaration of independence in 1963 under Kayibanda to the ascension of Major-General Juvenal Habyarimana in 1973 was typified by an overly tribalised politics in favor of the Hutus and low-grade genocide directed at Tutsis (Gourevitch 1998, pp. 48). At the start, Habyarimana insisted on an end to Tutsi persecution. By 1990, and with the Tustis dominated Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) hurrying his regime from the north, a burgeoning economic crisis from within and the clamor for multi-party politics, he reversed his policies and the “ anti-Tutsi policies became more violent” (pp. 7).

According to Gourevitch (1998), Habyarimana embrace of reforms was lukewarm, a capitulation to foreign coercion, if anything, the competition for power only provoked the paranoid feeling that the Hutu strangled hold on

power in jeopardy (pp. 82). Here, scholars are in agreement that if RPF invasion offered Habyarimana's oligarchy a unifying specter of a common enemy, it also provoked the clamor for a final solution to the Tutsi menace. Needless to say, schizophrenic anti-Tutsi atmosphere which was characterized by mass objectification of Tutsis as arch enemies would pervade Rwanda in the period preceding the Genocide.

Indeed it's in this period that the ideology of hate as exemplified by the infamous "Ten Commandment of the Hutu" which proclaimed Hutu supremacy, advocated for a Hutu-centric state and the mass indoctrination of Hutus at all levels with this poison of hate was published. At the same time, it's in this self-same period that the Hutu militia that was responsible for the killings during the genocide was instituted and machete-armed. Thus, the event on 6th April 1994 merely precipitated the inevitable. Rwandan Genocide as a Cross-Cultural Conflict

Caricatured this way, and the fact that conflict, of which genocide is but an extreme manifestation, is nothing but competition by groups over incompatible goals, then one can easily visualize how the Rwandan genocide was determined by cultural perceptions. And by culture I mean what Samovar and Porter calls: "the deposit of knowledge, experience, beliefs, values, attitudes, meanings, hierarchies, religion...roles...concepts of the universe and material objects and possessions acquired by a group of people in the course of generations through individual and group striving" (Samovar and Porter 2004, p. 1). "

Indeed, in the brief history outlined here, we have seen how culturally undifferentiated groups were subsequently organized by socio-economic characteristics into castes and how the constructed identities would later be the basis of discrimination. But this is not all, in this brief history; we have seen how culture defines what society values (e. g. and in Rwanda), further we have demonstrated the nexus between culture and identity, that is to say, we have seen how culture avails shared symbols that are able to constitute group identity, the impact of this symbols on collective emotions and how culture defines potential boundary, or rather, the context in which conflict occurs.

To illustrate, scholars have argued that a set of symbols which illustrates the link between culture and conflict involves what Volkan Vamik calls “ chosen traumas:” that is, the experiences of collective victimization (like the historical experiences of the Hutus under the Tutsis) that was part of Hutu identity.

Indeed, the fact that collective Hutu experiences came to symbolize for them ‘ tremendous fear, threat, pain, and feelings of hopelessness” is beyond dispute (Gourevitch 1994). To this must be added the fact that traumatized groups generally stereotype their enemies as irredeemably hostile, callous, or evil. Needless to say, the mindset borne of this perception is ripe for conflict since a possible response by the oppressed group is reactive aggression towards the hated other.

In fact, a possible way of seeing how this potential was exploited can readily be seen in the fact that political agitation and mobilization in Rwanda by the

Hutus in the period preceding the genocide broadly played on the deep seated fears of the Hutu commoners. Taken together, it's the opinion of this writer that any analysis of the causes and conditions that fostered the Rwandan genocide must appreciate the role of these cultural components. Infact, most pundits recognize this. Take Waller's explanatory model for genocide for instance, according to Waller's, genocides have four dimensions.

The first one is the human predisposition to violence (here he identifies three predispositions: ethnocentrism, xenophobia and desire for social dominance - all are unconvincingly asserted as innate); the second one focuses on the cultural forces that mould and channel these innate predispositions towards a specific direction (here he identifies cultural belief systems and authority orientation - all are constructed in the cause of historical development, as I have demonstrated, and are fostered by ideology and propaganda: see the Hutu manifesto, Hutu ten Commandments and other incendiary pronouncements and activities by Hutu extremists in this regard); the third one is cultural re- enforcers (with respect to perpetrators, he identifies group conformity and the merger of role and person - again we see how the Hutu Ten Commandments sought to institute group conformity by prohibiting Hutu-Tutsi intermarriages or social mixing, among other things); the fourth one refers to institutions that alters the identity victims by dehumanizing, blaming and objectifying them as the evil other - here, informal political institutions instituted by Habyarimana come into play) (Adelman 2005, pp 5).

In short, cultural components played an important role in the conflict. Rwandan Genocide as a Struggle for Power However, while one may maintain that cultural components played a pivotal role in the Rwandan genocide, we must still realize that cultural components alone cannot provide an adequate understanding of the genocide. For instance, cultural analysis cannot explain why so many Hutu civilians participated in the genocide; why slaughtering Tutsis became a pass time in post colonial Rwanda? Why the Rwandan society imploded when it did in 1994 and why it galvanized the entire country within such a short time?

Moreover, and like I have demonstrated in Waller's explanatory model, political components interacted extensively with cultural components in this conflict - already, we have seen the role of political actors in the conflict: exploiting cultural perceptions and magnifying differences here, encouraging the development and publication of hate ideology and hate propaganda their and ultimately mobilizing, motivating, arming, directing and supervising the genocidaires.

Thus, an explanation of the Rwandan genocide must bring power components to bear. And by power, I mean control over politics and government. To this must be added the argument that an analysis of the genocide that utilizes the power lens will go a long way in answering the questions I have posed hear.

With regard to the power component of the conflict, scholars have argued that Rwanda's genocide was " conceived, organized, and encouraged by Hutu elites who were hell bent on keeping the reins of political control firmly

within their grasp (Gourevitch 1998). " To underscore this argument, the same writer has demonstrated how regional Hutu elites squabbled over economic resources, especially foreign aid and tax revenue that they controlled by virtue of their political positions. According to Magnarella (2005), the strategy this elite employed involved the marginalization of the educated Tutsi to undercut local competition and demonization of the Tutsi so as to hoodwink the Hutu-commoners into thinking that this elite protected them from their historical adversary (pp 11).

Indeed, and to elaborate, from 1960s to 1994, the ruling Hutu elite promoted the following ideology: that Tutsis were foreign aggressors who could not be regarded as true Rwandan's; that Hutu had been the aboriginal inhabitants of the land and were later ' enslaved by the aristocratic interlopers'; that a Hutu-centric state was not only ' legitimate but also ontologically democratic (pp. 12). '

This point, it must be pointed out, is but another illustration of my earlier argument that the Hutu elite exploited culturally molded perceptions and symbols to justify their privileged position and the persecution of the Tutsis. At the national level, Gourevitch has convincingly argued that Habyarimana was to a certain degree the puppet of the wife and, by extension, his wife clan.

According to this narrative, le clan de madame - Habyarimana's wife's court within the court (better known as akazu) - " was at the concentric webs of political, economic, military muscle and patronage that came to be known as the Hutu power (Gourevitch 1998, pp 82). " According to the same author,

the power enjoyed by this grouping was such that they could even contravene the president himself. To strengthen its hold on power and grip on state resources especially foreign aid, the akazu is said to have assassinated and mass-murdered political opponents, funded hate-media, spied for Habyarimana, founded and bankrolled death squads such as Interahamwe, Zero Network and Bullet Groups and formulated the marshal plan that was to be the final solution to the Tutsi threat.

By signing the Arusha Accord which allowed for a ceasefire with RPF, power-sharing between Tutsis and Hutus, return of Tutsi refugees from Rwanda and integration of the RPF and Rwandan armed forces, Habyarimana is said to have placed himself on the wrong side of the Hutu extremists – note that the Hutu propaganda machine had inveighed constantly against each and every one of this provisions.

Looked at this way, one clearly sees why foreign observers believed that Habyarimana was killed by Hutu extremist who had been planning for a genocide all along and who took the assassination of the president as a pretext (by blaming it on RPF) to execute grand plan (final solution). Indeed, observers have noted “ that only a month before, the Hutu Power publication, Kangura, had run the banner headline ‘ Habyarimana will die in March’. The same issue carried a ‘ cartoon depicting the President as a Tutsi-loving RPF accomplice (Magnarella 2005, pp 12). Needless to say, this argument has it that when the Tocsin was sounded by this Hutu extremists, Rwandan farmers, who subscribed to a tradition which emphasized

obedience to superiors simply went on a murdering spree to defend themselves from the evil Tutsis.

But this is not all; some pundits have also argued that these peasants also killed to gain access to land and cows thereby presenting the conflict as a conflict over resources - relative deprivation theory come into play here. Taken together, one can argue that while the power and cultural components of the Rwandan genocide seem to explain a lot, for instance, it explains some of the facts which cultural components could not explain like: why the genocide occurred when it did?

Why slaughtering Tutsis became a pass time in post colonial Rwanda? Why the and why it galvanized the entire country within such a short time? However, analysis suggests that a combination of the two lenses still ignores other underlying causes of the genocide. Namely, the political economy factors that drove Habyarimana's regime to repress Rwandans and demonize opponents, demographic factors that brought about a land crisis, the role of foreign countries such as France and psychological factors that turned ordinary, seemingly sane, Hutus into mass-murderers. Further, it ignores the role that the countries institutions played in molding the rigid, autocratic and anti-urban society that Rwanda was.

Indeed, and like Gourevitch argues, it must be pointed out that an analysis of the institutional factors that limited labour mobility, land markets and non-agrarian job placements in the country would add vital elements to our understanding of the genocide (Gourevitch 1995).

Conclusion In conclusion, it can be argued that power and cultural factors played a proximate role in the causation of the genocide. And to repeat, culturally molded differences were used by a cabal of corrupts Hutu extremists to develop a hate ideology which allowed them to both justify their privileged position and blame the Tutsis for the relative deprivation of the Hutu commoners. But while the two components are important in understanding the conflict, a more comprehensive analysis of the genocide can be arrived at if other components (e. g. institutional components) are brought to bear.