

THE MYTH OF THE RWANDAN GENOCIDE: WESTERN PERCEPTIONS OF AFRICAN TRIBALISM AND ETHNICITY

BY
NATALIA GRUENBAUM

Natalia Gruenbaum is a senior studying International History at the United States Military Academy. She wrote this paper to fulfill her research requirement for a senior faculty course titled Race, Ethnicity, and the Nation. Her thesis will focus on gender and sexual violence during the Rwandan genocide.

Gross international confusion occurred as a result of culturally- skewed reporting, and this constitutes one of the many tragedies of the 1994 Rwandan genocide. Headlines for major western newspapers reduced the complex nature of the conflict into simple terms that aligned with cultural bias and implied African primordialism.¹ According to Allan Thompson's *The Media and the Rwanda Genocide*, foreign correspondents, unable to communicate in the local language and ignorant of Rwandan culture, relied on phrases like "ancient ethnic warfare" and "tribal conflict" to describe the slaughter they witnessed but could not understand. Thompson argues that the international community understood Rwanda as "little more than brutal tribalism [since] words like 'ethnic' or 'tribal'" appeared interchangeably in almost all major news sources.² He suggests that the media "fixated on tribal differences because that reinforced ideas about African primitivism."³ In their rush to publish stories, journalists failed to uncover the root of the conflict and hastily summarized the genocide as the remnants of pre-colonial conflict.⁴ The careless use of terms like "ethnic" and "tribal" played into stereotypes of inherent African weakness and created a discourse for the Rwandan genocide that journalists and historians alike cannot escape. The western media misrepresented the Hutu-Tutsi conflict as ancient or pre-colonial when, in fact, it sprung directly from European racialization practices during the twentieth century which resulted in the creation of a Hutu ethnicity.

¹ See *The New York Times* Archives for a listing of headlines concerning the 1994 Rwandan genocide to include "Terror Convulses Rwandan Capital as Tribes Battle," "Peace Talks a Casualty of Tribal War in Rwandan Capital," and "Tribes Battle for Rwandan Capital." Available at : <http://query.nytimes.com/search>.

² Allan Thomas, *The Media and the Rwanda Genocide* (London: Pluto, 2007), 265.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, 263.

In the media, the word “tribal” was most often used to describe the Rwandan genocide since it fit nicely into European stereotypes of non-Arab Africa. In his chapter titled “Terminology Chaos,” the political scientist Walker Connor addresses the common misuse of this term and attempts to deliver a clear definition. He explains that, in its application, tribes more closely resemble nations than ethnicities since tribalism “constitute[s] separate nations or potential nations in and by themselves.”⁵ In addition, Connor makes the claim that separate tribes are as psychologically and tangibly different as France and Germany, for example.⁶ According to the Rwandan scholar Peter Uvin, the Hutu and the Tutsi could not qualify as tribes since they “spoke the same language, believed in the same god, shared the same culture, and lived side by side by the time Europeans arrived.”⁷ Even though the contemporary western media perceived the genocide as remnants of “ancient tribal warfare,” the homogeneity of pre-colonial Rwandan society disproves this assumption since clear distinctions between the two groups did not exist.

Although Hutu and Tutsi labels existed prior to colonialism, they indicated class rather than ethnic difference. After the fourteenth century, Hutu and Tutsi developed into labor titles as the state expanded and groups “were incorporated as Hutu if they were predominantly farmers, or as Tutsi if they were predominantly herders, and aristocrats of both ‘groups’ were assimilated and intermarried with the old aristocracy.”⁸ Classification did not hold political implication and the two groups assimilated thoroughly through marriage. The author of “Contested Identities,” Villa Jefremovas, concludes that pre-colonial Rwanda “was never one single coherent unit with two tribes, but rather a state created by conquest and assimilation.”⁹ For tribalism to have existed in pre-colonial Rwanda, it would have required that each group retain its distinctiveness and avoid amalgamation, neither of which occurred. Since ancient Rwanda did not contain two separate tribes with distinct differences, it could not have experienced pre-colonial tribal warfare as journalists in the 1990s reported.

Although anthropologists, social scientists, and historians generally disagree about the specifics of ethnicity, most seem to agree on three essential characteristics: 1) the perception of shared ancestry, 2) perception

⁵ Walker Connor, *Ethnonationalism: The Quest for Understanding* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 107.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Peter Uvin, “Ethnicity and Power in Burundi and Rwanda: Different Paths to Mass Violence,” *Comparative Politics* 31, 3rd ser. (1999): 255.

⁸ Villia Jefremovas, “Contested Identities: Power and the Politics of Ethnicity, Ethnography, and History in Rwanda,” *Canadian Anthropology Society* 39.1 (1997): 95.

⁹ *Ibid.*

of similarities, and 3) the perception of a shared historical past.¹⁰ In ethnicity, it is a *sense* of sameness that unites its members and overshadows most differences that may exist.¹¹ Members of an ethnicity choose to overlook internal differences and instead stress shared similarities within the group. Although kinship and similarity are critical to ethnicity, they alone are not enough to maintain the unity of an ethnic group.¹² According to the noted sociologist Max Weber, “[w]here [perceived shared memories] are lacking, or once they cease to exist, the sense of ethnic group membership is absent, regardless of how close the kinship may be.”¹³ The group must remember and reflect on the history that served to develop its ethnicity. If a group forgets or does not share a common history, the members will not understand why such ethnicity was, and remains, critical to the survival and/or success of the group and each of its members.

Ethnicity, like race or gender, serves as a form of group and individual identity. Ethnicity may be ascribed or prescribed and may change for an individual.¹⁴ As the cultural anthropologist Jack Eller explains, a “century of observation has taught us that, while some ethnic groups may indeed be ancient, others are brand new, and not only the groups but also the cultures or traditions, or ‘heritages,’ to which they refer can be of recent vintage.”¹⁵ Ethnicity can be “made and unmade and remade” as perceptions of common descent, similarities, and shared history change.¹⁶ Ethnicity most often emerges amid conflict and serves to designate rewards or sanctions. During periods of peace, ethnic labels may even fade away since “[those] who live in their culture unproblematically tend not to be ethnic.”¹⁷ Once conflict arises, however, new ethnicities or new forms of ancient ethnicities may appear so long as the three criteria apply.

Based on Rwandan oral traditions and written European accounts, it appears that the Tutsi arrived in Rwanda in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.¹⁸ In pre-colonial Rwanda, the Hutu were farmers, the Tutsi were cattle-rearing, and the Twa served as potters and hunters. During this time

¹⁰ Conner, *Ethnonationalism*; Jack David Eller, *From Culture to Ethnicity to Conflict: an Anthropological Perspective on International Ethnic Conflict* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1999); Max Weber, “Ethnic Groups,” *New Tribalisms: The Resurgence of Race and Ethnicity*, Michael Hughey, ed. (New York: New York University Press, 1998); Aimable Twagilimana, *The Debris of Ham: Ethnicity, Regionalism, and the 1994 Rwandan Genocide* (Lanham, Md.: University of America, 2003); Joane Nagel, “Constructing Ethnicity: Creating and Recreating Ethnic Identity and Culture,” *New Tribalisms: The Resurgence of Race and Ethnicity*, Ed. Michael Hughey (New York: New York UP, 1998).

¹¹ Eller, *From Culture to Ethnicity to Conflict*, 13.

¹² *Ibid.*, 10.

¹³ Weber, “Ethnic,” 22.

¹⁴ Nagel, “Constructing Ethnicity,” 240.

¹⁵ Eller, *From Culture to Ethnicity*, 15.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁸ Uvin, “Ethnicity and Power,” 255.

“Tutsi, Hutu, and Twa were more social class markers than codified ethnic labels” as flexibility remained.¹⁹ The population of Rwanda became relatively homogenous as the population spoke Kinyarwanda, believed in the same god, shared the same culture, and intermarried.²⁰ Although pre-colonial Rwandan society experienced significant assimilation, inequality between Tutsis and Hutus remained in the form of patron-client relationships within an oligarchic form of government. Clients who received land from a patron chief became known as Hutu while cattle-holding lineages became Tutsi.²¹ In exchange for land, Hutus were required to fulfill obligatory labor service, *uburetwa*, in which they worked two out of every five days for the patron. Although a Hutu-Tutsi societal hierarchy existed in pre-colonial Rwanda, no widespread violence erupted unlike during the 1950’s and 1994 when the Hutu majority gained political power.²²

While Hutus and Tutsis encompassed different classes and consequently maintained arguably different cultures, neither qualified as a distinct ethnicity in pre-colonial Rwanda. The African historian, Enid Schildkrout, argues that ethnic groups must have a notion of distinctiveness, which neither group possessed.²³ When the Europeans arrived in the twentieth century, Hutus and Tutsis had assimilated to the point where they fulfilled the criteria for an ethnicity: kinship, similarities, and a common history. In addition, both groups accepted the patron-client relationship relatively peacefully and consequently felt no need for distinguished ethnic boundaries at that point in time. Ethnicity can transcend other identities, including class, so one may argue that in pre-colonial society, Rwandan served as an ethnic identity, incorporating both Hutus and Tutsis.²⁴ Regardless of the conclusion one draws, it is clear that Hutus and Tutsis did not have distinct differences and therefore did not constitute separate ethnic groups before European colonialization.

Rwandan colonialism first began in the early twentieth century under German rule and continued when the Belgians took over in 1912. As Europeans arrived, they observed the patron-client system in Rwanda and concluded that the Tutsi were the natural rulers.²⁵ As white Europeans in the early twentieth century, the Belgians assumed that “wherever in Africa there was evidence of organized state life, there the ruling groups must have come

¹⁹ Twagilimana, *The Debris of Ham*, 19.

²⁰ Twagilimana, *The Debris of Ham*, 22; and Uvin, "Ethnicity and Power," 255.

²¹ Jefremovas, "Contested Identities," 94-95.

²² Before his assassination in 1994, President Habyarimana was considered a moderate Hutu and rejected extreme anti-Tutsi attitudes. His death allowed more radical members of the government to pursue violent anti-Tutsi policy during a time of economic crisis. *Ibid.*, 97.

²³ Donald Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict* (Berkeley: University of California, 2006), 53.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Jefremovas, "Contested identities," 96; and Sanders, "The Hamitic Hypothesis," 530.

from elsewhere.”²⁶ They used the biblical story of Ham to explain Tutsi dominance like earlier Europeans had used it to explain civilization in Egypt.²⁷ The Hamitic thesis allowed European settlers to conceptualize development in African within Victorian-era racial theory. Since Africans were biologically incapable of advancement, Europeans postulated that a non-African race, the Hamitics (of which the Tutsis were members) had long ago invaded and conquered portions of Africa.²⁸ Europeans perceived the Hamitic race as a branch of the Caucasian race and, therefore, biologically superior to native Negroes.²⁹ In this way, Europeans were able to rationalize the socioeconomic hierarchy they found in Rwanda within their own racial theory. The Belgians saw a racial/biological divide rather than a social one and forced their perception upon Rwanda through colonial policy.

In order to advance Belgian interest in the region, colonialists used racist policies to change the oligarchic structure to one based on racial superiority. They handpicked those rulers favorable to European exploitation.³⁰ Through institutions like schools, the Catholic Church, and census, Europeans created distinct ethnic differences between the Hutu and Tutsi.³¹ Over a short period of time, these policies created conflict between the Hutu and Tutsi and made ethnic boundaries relevant. As tension mounted, distinctions between Hutu and Tutsi became more important for the distribution of European rewards and sanctions.

Under colonial policy, Hutus developed perceptions of kinship, similarity, and most importantly, of shared history separate from Tutsis. With racialization policies, Hutu and Tutsi became permanent ethnic labels based on lineage rather than socioeconomic status. Over the course of several generations, entire families became composed solely of one ethnicity and this led to the perception of common descent. In addition, ethnic myths served to explain the “social difference” between the Tutsi and Hutu and stressed Hutu kinship stemming from Ham and Gahutu.³² Like kinship, societal similarities created a distinct Hutu culture as a result of colonial exploitation and oppression. Regardless of economic status, each Hutu was required to contribute forced labor, forced crops, and forced sales.³³ These obligations united all Hutus in Rwanda and worked to create the

²⁶ Mahmood Mamdani, . *When Victims Become Killers: Colonialism, Nativism, and the Genocide in Rwanda* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 80.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 86.

²⁸ Edith Sanders, “The Hamitic Hypothesis: Its Origin and Functions in Time Perspective,” *The Journal of African History* 10.4 (1969), 528.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 526.

³⁰ Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers*, 96.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 87-88.

³² Gahutu was perceived as the mythical ancestor of the Hutu people according to ethnic Rwandan myth. *Ibid.*, 79.

³³ *Ibid.*, 95-96.

distinctiveness needed for ethnicity. Likewise, oppressive policies established during the colonial period left a strong memory of harsh servitude. Even after some Belgian policies ended, the sociopolitical structure of Rwanda served as a constant reminder of Tutsi domination. As a result of their distinct kinship, similarities, and history of oppression under Tutsi power (with Belgian endorsement), Hutu became an ethnic identity in postcolonial Rwanda.

The western media misunderstood and misrepresented the Rwandan genocide as the remnants of ancient tribalism and pre-colonial warfare. Ignorant of the culture and short on time, journalists described the conflict in terms that aligned with stereotypes of primitive Africa. In reality, however, Hutu and Tutsi never constituted separate tribes prior to colonization. In order to become tribes, Hutus and Tutsis needed distinct differences which they did not acquire until the twentieth century. As a direct result of racist Belgian policy, Hutu and Tutsi did eventually qualify as ethnic labels. Even if one or both of the groups did qualify as ethnic prior to the colonial period, their 1994 ethnicities would have been a new variation.

Only one group needed to develop into an ethnicity to facilitate ethnic violence as it creates an “us against the world” mentality as happened with the Hutu. Postcolonial Rwanda was the first time that Hutus experienced a sense of distinctiveness born from their perceptions of kinship, similarities, and most importantly, shared history of oppression. Consequently, the Hutu ethnicity first appeared in the postcolonial period. Since tribalism and ethnicity did not exist prior to colonization, the 1994 genocide could not be rooted in ancient ethnic and tribal warfare as the western media claimed.

Although eighteen years have passed since the Rwandan genocide, the international community could benefit from reexamining the conflict. In their efforts to alert the international community, journalists oversimplified the issue and excused western inaction. Few westerners were surprised to see further evidence of African brutality and violence, and they consequently rejected any moral obligation to intervene. Upon further study, it becomes clear that Rwanda’s ethnic problems stemmed from European colonialism, rather than from some inherent African

weakness. While this may not hold true for all African conflicts, it does challenge scholars, historians, and leaders to reject stereotypes of African tribalism. Instead of picturing face paint and spears, it is these individuals' responsibility to recognize the complexity and individuality of each conflict. Africa, like Europe and North America, deals with complex issues and deserves careful examination after so many years of thoughtless dismissal.