

**The Heart of Rwanda's Drum:
History as Justification for Discrimination and Violence**

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Introduction

In Rwanda, there is a proverb which says that only a drum's maker can know the secret that lies in its heart.¹ In much of Africa, drums are symbolic of political power, and Rwanda is no exception. In pre-colonial times every king had a dynastic drum, the capture of which was tantamount to capturing the king himself.² Drumbeats called men out to war and kept the rhythm of the dance.³ And yet a certain mystery surrounds this symbol of political might, for once a drum has been made, it becomes impossible to see what is inside it. Thus, its contents become "a secret known only by the builder and the owner of this emblem of power."⁴ The owner of the drum, as the exclusive holder of this knowledge, has the power to disclose this secret, or to obscure and manipulate the truth, however he sees fit. This simple story can be taken as a metaphor for the role of history – that is, the interpretation and presentation of past events – in Rwanda. Political power holders in Rwanda have placed history squarely in the centre of their drums and have used these instruments to both justify their rule and, at times, even call Rwandans to war.⁵ From colonization until the 1994 genocide and beyond, Rwanda's governments have crafted different interpretations of their country's past in order to justify violence and discrimination.

The use of history to justify discrimination and even violence is certainly not unique to Rwanda, but the recurrence, intensity and effectiveness of doing so has been quite striking there. Both of the country's colonial regimes – first German, then Belgian – created a historical vision for Rwanda which they used to justify their discriminatory rule. Following independence, the new Hutu government turned the predominant colonial historical narrative on its head, using historical arguments to justify repeated violence against Tutsis. In 1973, following Juvénal Habyarimana's coup, anti-Tutsi violence was halted,

¹ Danielle de Lame, "(Im)possible Belgian Mourning for Rwanda," *African Studies Review*, 2005, 34.

² Jan Vansina, *Antecedents to Modern Rwanda: the Nyiginya Kingdom*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), 44-48.

³ Alison Des Forges, *Leave None to Tell the Story: Genocide in Rwanda*, (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1999), 65.

⁴ de Lame, "(Im)possible Belgian Mourning for Rwanda," 34.

⁵ Des Forges, *Leave None to Tell*, 65.

but discrimination continued, with the new regime's historical vision once more being offered as justification. In the early 1990s, the Habyarimana government found itself under siege from all sides, and anti-Tutsi violence began again, culminating in the genocide of 1994. At every step along the way, the violence was justified and framed in historical terms.

The changing historical visions of power-holders in Rwanda and their use to justify violence and discrimination, from the colonial period until the genocide, will be the main focus of this paper. The pre-colonial Nyiginya kingdom's use of history as ideology, although important, can only be touched on, while the historical arguments used by members of the international community to justify their actions during the genocide can barely be mentioned. The complex relationship between Rwanda and Burundi and the possible areas of overlap between their histories of violence, although fascinating, lies outside the scope of this project and can only briefly be touched on. Likewise, the new historical vision of the post-genocide Rwandan government cannot be discussed here, no matter how significant the possible consequences for Rwanda's future.

Before continuing, it is also necessary to say a few words about the sources used in this paper. Since the genocide, the outpouring of writing on Rwanda has been immense. Scholars of many disciplines have rushed to examine the collapse of Rwandan society in the early 1990s, trying to come to terms with one of the most horrific conflicts of the past century. They have approached the Rwandan crisis from seemingly all angles and academic perspectives, generating an enormous literature. This vast outpouring of scholarship is excellent news for anyone interested in Rwanda, but these sources are not unproblematic.⁶ The vast majority of works on Rwanda has been published post-1994, with some of the most important ones being published less than five years after the genocide.⁷ Sources published so soon

⁶ Jan Vansina, "The Politics of History and Crisis in the Great Lakes Region," *Africa Today* 45(1), 37-44.

⁷ See for instance, Gérard Prunier's *The Rwanda Crisis* (1995) and Alison Des Forges' *Leave None to Tell* (1998).

after the events they discuss must be treated with caution, particularly when faced with a subject as emotionally resonant as the genocide.⁸

Anglophone researchers face another problem with the sources. Prior to 1994, almost all research and writing on Rwanda was conducted in French, and most of it has yet to be translated into English. French was the official language of Rwanda under Belgian rule, and it remains one of the official languages to this day. Virtually all primary sources available to historians, from the nineteenth century to the mid-1990s, are either in French or in Kinyarwanda, and those Kinyarwanda sources which have been translated are, by and large, only translated into French. The disadvantage this presents for Anglophone scholars is only beginning to be recognized and dealt with.⁹ Until these sources become more widely available, however, writers who lack French are largely confined to the secondary sources published by other authors and must make use of their interpretations of the primary sources. This is the unfortunate situation this writer finds herself in. To compensate, I have endeavoured to consult both a large and varied selection of English-language secondary sources, and to find and make use of those few primary sources that are available in English.

Rwanda Pre-1959

The Nyiginya Kingdom

Before Rwanda was claimed as a German colony in the 1880s, the area was divided into a number of small kingdoms, chief among them being the Nyiginya. Earlier in the nineteenth century, the

⁸ There is a great temptation, even for the most disciplined of scholars, to impose one's knowledge of the present on the past. Especially with an event as horrific and incomprehensible as the genocide, there is the risk that we will let the genocide over-determine the rest of Rwanda's past, that its complicated history will be reduced to only one story which culminates, with seeming inevitability, in the genocide. It seems to me both right and necessary that we should examine the roots of this tragic conflict and try to determine how and why it took place, yet we must always be careful that in the attempt to "make sense" of the genocide we do not come to see everything in Rwanda's past as leading inexorably towards one inevitable conclusion.

⁹ For instance, Jan Vansina has recently acknowledged the difficulties facing Anglophone writers on Rwanda and he republished his earlier work, *Le Rwanda Ancien: le Royaume Nyiginya*, in English in 2004.

Nyiginya court had begun the process of consolidating power and conquering neighbouring kingdoms.¹⁰ This process was greatly accelerated under King Rwabugiri, who came to power in 1867, and by the time the area became a German colony, the Nyiginya kingdom was well-established over most of the territory that makes up modern day Rwanda. Indeed, the state the Germans encountered was both highly organized and advanced. The government was centered on the king and queen mother, who used a system of multiple chiefs to maintain and assert their control across the countryside.¹¹ Every region had two chiefs, one who controlled cattle and pasturelands and one who controlled agricultural land.¹² The king frequently played these two against each other in a delicate political game to maintain power and counterbalance competing courtly lineages.¹³ According to Jan Vansina, Nyiginya society in large measure rested on a form of clientage, through which individuals would seek the protection and patronage of those more powerful than them, and in return would perform labour or other services. These arrangements, known as *ubuhake* contracts, had become increasingly common during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and were present at all levels of society, involving everyone from the most prominent members at court to the lowliest peasants.¹⁴

When King Rujugira came to power through a coup in the 1770s, he created a new ruling ideology that was heavily influenced by the idea of historical cycles.¹⁵ This new ideology emphasized and indeed increased the importance of historical precedents to justify actions in the present. Not only would the kings' dynastic names now repeat themselves, but so too would the characteristics of the kings. Thus, all kings with the name Kigeri were considered to be warrior kings, and the only justification needed for these kings to go to war was the fact that they were named Kigeri, and all Kigeri in history

¹⁰ Vansina, *Antecedents*, 99-125.

¹¹ Vansina, *Antecedents*, 67-98.

¹² Vansina, *Antecedents*, 132-133.

¹³ Vansina, *Antecedents*, 126-134.

¹⁴ Vansina, *Antecedents*, 97, 140-163.

¹⁵ Vansina, *Antecedents*, 214.

had gone to war.¹⁶ Jan Vansina, the most prominent writer on the Nyiginya kingdom, says this of the change in historical understanding under Rujugira:

The theory of cycles...implies that as history repeats itself cycle after cycle, there always are historical precedents that parallel each contemporary situation. To know these precedents allows one...above all, to justify today's actions by citing the precedents that they merely repeat. Historical remembrance and its knowledge thus became the ultimate legitimation.¹⁷

By the time the German explorers reached Rwanda and made contact with the Nyiginya court, the importance of history to the maintenance of political power was well-established, and the ruling elite possessed an historical vision that traced the history of Rwanda back to creation. Historians and ritualists were some of the most important personages at court, and historical knowledge was carefully guarded. Indeed, the punishment awaiting a historian who forgot any of the knowledge entrusted to him was death.¹⁸ With the onset of colonialism, however, the new European rulers of Rwanda developed an entirely different understanding of Rwanda's past, one that fit their own world view and which they could use to justify their discriminatory policies.

Rwanda under German Rule: 1889-1916

The subordination of the Nyiginya kingdom to German colonialism which occurred in the late 1880s initially had little effect on Rwandan society. The Germans' first significant impact came when King Rutwardina was assassinated in 1896 and the Germans became involved in the ensuing power struggle. The queen mother managed both to have her son, Musinga, enthroned and to persuade the Germans that he was indeed the legitimate ruler. They would continue to support him until the end of their rule, using violence "constructively" in order to shore up Musinga's reign.¹⁹ In other respects, however, the effect of the German presence was minimal. They sought to rule as indirectly as possible

¹⁶ Vansina, *Antecedents*, 92.

¹⁷ Vansina, *Antecedents*, 94.

¹⁸ Vansina, *Antecedents*, 3-13.

¹⁹ Lemarchand, *Rwanda and Burundi*, 47-60.

and to keep the existing government in place. Indeed, by the start of World War I there were only ten German officials in all of Rwanda.²⁰ In spite of their low numbers, however, German administrators did make one very important contribution which still has echoes in Rwanda to this day. That is, they created a new historical vision for Rwanda which they could use to both explain Rwandan society and to justify their rule.

When the early German imperialists began interacting with the Nyiginya kingdom, they found a society which they could not easily fit into their racist ideas about Africans. It was ruled by a well-organized, efficient and highly centralized government. The king controlled a professional standing army, and land and cattle were tightly controlled by the central court. Such an elaborate and well-established kingdom did not fit into the Europeans' preconceived notions about the primitive nature of African society. How were they to explain the ability of these people, supposedly inferior and in need of the "civilizing touch" of European imperialism, to establish such an advanced form of government and society? The answer lay in framing a new understanding of Rwanda's past and society, one which would fit within the framework of European racism and would justify their rule. Accordingly, the Germans turned to the popular "Hamitic myth."

The Hamitic myth, based on the biblical story of Ham and his son Canaan, was a tool used repeatedly by European colonialists to justify all forms of racism and discrimination against their African subjects. This myth claimed that all signs of civilization in Africa had originated from a Caucasoid people who came to be known as "Hamites."²¹ In order to make the Nyiginya kingdom fit into these racist

²⁰ Lemarchand, *Rwanda and Burundi*, 47-60.

²¹ According to the biblical story, Ham saw his father, Noah, lying drunk and naked in his tent, and rather than cover him up, he went and told his two brothers. They then walked in backwards, so as not to see their father's nakedness, and covered him with a blanket. When Noah learned of Ham's actions, he cursed Ham's son, Canaan, to serve his brothers as a slave. To the European slavers and colonialists, the colour of African skin was considered ample proof that they had been marked by a curse. Africans were thus labelled as Ham's descendents, making them destined to be slaves. However, the Hamitic myth underwent something of a revolution following Napoleon's occupation of Egypt in the late eighteenth century. Given the overwhelming evidence that Egypt presented for an advanced African civilization, Europeans soon became sensible that the biblical story only mentioned the curse of Canaan, rather than all of Ham's offspring. This new version of the Hamitic hypothesis

views, the Germans theorized that there were two different races inhabiting Rwanda, the Tutsi and the Hutu. Herders and warriors, the Tutsi were supposedly the descendants of this Hamitic race, who allegedly originated in Ethiopia before migrating south and eventually arriving in central Africa. There, they easily conquered the "Negroid" Hutu inhabitants of the region, and established the sophisticated Nyiginya kingdom. As the supposed descendants of a Caucasoid people, the Tutsi were seen as much closer to Europeans than the black African Hutu, and were therefore considered more intelligent and more aristocratic.²² From this German viewpoint, it was "logical for the Tutsi to rule Hutu ... just as it was reasonable for Europeans to rule Africans," for it was the Tutsis' very "Europeanness" – shown indisputably by their supposed great height, thin noses and fairer skin – which not only entitled them to rule, but also explained why they had been able to establish such a strong kingdom.²³

This German version of Rwanda's past was a dramatic departure from the official history of the Nyiginya court, which made next to no mention of the Hutu-Tutsi divide.²⁴ Indeed, since 1994 many have accused the Germans, and even more so the Belgians, of manufacturing the categories "Hutu" and "Tutsi" virtually out of thin air. In order to understand the impact of the new historical vision framed by Rwanda's imperial rulers it is imperative that the nature of Hutu-Tutsi relations before the arrival of Europeans be as clearly understood as possible. Did the Germans see a social division that the Nyiginya court historians simply chose to ignore? Or did they manufacture races in order to suit their own needs or ideology? Although there is no clear consensus on the precise nature of pre-colonial Hutu-Tutsi

posited that all civilizations, and essentially "everything of value," in Africa could not be the result of descendants of Canaan, but were rather the work of descendants of Ham's other children. These Hamites were supposedly a race of Caucasoid people who travelled throughout Africa, conquering the black African descendents of Canaan. For the biblical story of Ham, see Genesis 9:20-27 (New International Version). For a more detailed discussion of the Hamitic myth and its impact on Africans, see Edith R. Sanders' "The Hamitic Hypothesis: Its Origins and Functions in Time Perspective," *The Journal of African History* 10 (4), 1969.

²² Des Forges, *Leave None to Tell*, 36.

²³ Des Forges, *Leave None to Tell*, 36.

²⁴ Rather, the main focus of the oral histories of the Nyiginya court was overwhelmingly on competing family lineages. Clan and family were far more important social divides than were aggregate categories like "Hutu" or "Tutsi." For more on the importance of family lineages see Vansina's *Antecedents*.

relations, it is clear that "Hutu" and "Tutsi" did exist before the onset of colonization, but that Europeans fundamentally changed the nature of these groups and the interactions between them.²⁵

Hutu and Tutsi

A consensus exists among scholars that the original inhabitants of the region were a people known as the Twa. They were gradually pushed aside, and today constitute only about 1% of the population.²⁶ According to the colonial version of Rwandan history, the marginalization of the Twa occurred first through the arrival of the agriculturalist Hutu in a great migration, which was followed sometime later by the arrival of the conquering, pastoralist Tutsi. There are, however, significant reasons to doubt this "great migration" theory.²⁷ The precise origins of Hutu and Tutsi, and whether they did originally constitute two separate ethnic groups, is a question to which we will likely never have an adequate answer, but it is clear that by at least the mid-eighteenth century the majority of the people living in the region were, for all intents and purposes, of one ethnicity.²⁸ They spoke the same language, shared the same religious and cultural beliefs, and intermarried extensively.²⁹ Family and clan lineages were by far the most important social divisions in pre-colonial Rwanda, and although the terms "Hutu" and "Tutsi" did exist, they did so alongside other similar terms such as "Hima" and "Bagogwe," which were used more to differentiate between occupations than ethnicities.³⁰

In the mid- to late-nineteenth century, however, the terms "Hutu" and "Tutsi" began to be used with increasing frequency, for a variety of reasons. The two main occupations in pre-colonial Rwanda were agriculture and herding, with the majority of the population being farmers. For centuries, the two

²⁵ Catharine Newbury, "Ethnicity and the Politics of History in Rwanda," *Africa Today* (45), 10-11; Vansina, *Antecedents*, 134-139.

²⁶ Peter Uvin, "Ethnicity and Power in Burundi and Rwanda: Different Paths to Mass Violence," *Comparative Politics* (31), 253-255.

²⁷ Vansina, *Antecedents*, 20-23.

²⁸ This does not include the Twa, who were always (and indeed still are) looked down upon by the other inhabitants of the region.

²⁹ Christian P. Scherrer, *Genocide and Crisis in Central Africa: Conflict Roots, Mass Violence, and Regional War*, (Westport, CT.: Praeger Publishers, 2002), 20-30; Prunier, *The Rwanda Crisis*, 5; Uvin, "Ethnicity and Power," 255.

³⁰ Vansina, *Antecedents*, 30-38.

groups had lived side by side in relative harmony, but an ever-growing population led to increased conflicts over land usage in the nineteenth century. In spite of their being the minority, several developments combined to tip the balance in the herders' favour. The establishment of the multiple-chief system, and the creation of the position of "cattle chief," was the first move in their favour. The newly appointed chiefs not only gained control of all cattle and pasturelands, but also gained an excellent platform from which to exploit others through *ubuhake* contracts.³¹ Furthermore, in the mid-1800s large swaths of land were set aside by the king as reserved pasture for particularly powerful or favoured herders.³² In addition to greatly increasing the prestige and power of these favoured members of the elite, and thus their ability to construct more *ubuhake* contracts, this policy also greatly increased the resentment of farmers who had land taken from them and given away to prominent pastoralists.

This new class of elite pastoralists, which was largely created by the policies of the Nyiginya court, gradually came to be referred to as the Tutsi, while the farmers who were increasingly subject to heavier *ubuhake* demands came to be known as the Hutu. As the nineteenth century wore on the use of the term "Tutsi" was gradually extended to all pastoralists, not just the elite, and it began to edge out other, occupationally-oriented terms such as "Hima."³³ Vansina has identified the creation of exclusively herder armies by the Nyiginya court as a possible reason behind the increasing use of the terms "Hutu" and "Tutsi."³⁴ The key, however, to the final differentiation between Hutu and Tutsi appears to have been the imposition of a new forced labour contract, known as *uburetwa*. Unlike *ubuhake*, which had been required of both herders and farmers, *uburetwa* was an obligation placed only on farmers, and it provoked great resentment among them.³⁵ Their hostility focused on the herder elite, or the Tutsi as they were now called, who both instigated *uburetwa* and were exempt from its heavy burden.

³¹ Vansina, *Antecedents*, 132-133.

³² Vansina, *Antecedents*, 127-133.

³³ Des Forges, *Leave None to Tell*, 32.

³⁴ Vansina, *Antecedents*, 134-137.

³⁵ Vansina, *Antecedents*, 34.

By the time the Germans arrived, then, the people of Rwanda were already roughly divided into Hutu and Tutsi, with the elite mostly – although not entirely – made up of those who called themselves Tutsi.³⁶ However, the Germans, and later too the Belgians, made several major leaps when interpreting the divide between the two groups. Perhaps most importantly, both colonial regimes wrongly assumed that the Hutu and Tutsi division was a matter of race, rather than one of social and economic status. In turn, the assumption that Hutu and Tutsi were two separate races led the Germans and Belgians to wrongly believe that an individual's group membership was fixed. On the contrary, before colonialism, according to Bruce Jones Hutu and Tutsi:

...were not fixed categories but fluid ones, varying through time and location depending on such factors as wealth, military prowess, family, control over a precious commodity, or occupation of a prestigious social position. There was mobility among the "classes": Hutu could become Tutsi and vice versa.³⁷

However, from the onset of colonialism, and particularly under Belgian rule, the fluidity between Hutu and Tutsi disappeared.

Early Belgian Rule: 1916-1945

In 1916, in the midst of the First World War, Belgian troops entered Rwanda and seized control from the Germans. From the very beginning Rwanda was to have a very different experience under Belgian rule, which was formalized as a League of Nations mandate in 1923. Unlike the minimal German presence, a flood of missionaries and administrators followed close behind the Belgian army. Missionaries would play a particularly important role in the coming decades, for until independence in the 1960s, they held a virtual monopoly on education within the colony. Yet in spite of all the changes triggered by the onset of Belgian rule, there was a continuity in governing philosophies between the two colonial regimes. The Belgians readily adopted the belief that the Tutsi were racially superior to the

³⁶ Vansina, *Antecedents*, 126-139; Prunier, *The Rwanda Crisis*, 21.

³⁷ Bruce Jones, *Peacemaking in Rwanda: the Dynamics of Failure*, (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2001), 18.

Hutu, and, it must be said, so did the Tutsi elite themselves.³⁸ Accustomed to the frequently shifting power of the court, the Tutsi elite knew well how to take advantage of anything in their own interest, and the biased beliefs of the European powers certainly fit the bill.³⁹

The Belgians used their beliefs about the origins of Hutu and Tutsi to justify their discriminatory rule; indeed their regime was one of state-sponsored racism against the Hutu. Because the Belgians believed that the Tutsi were "natural" rulers, they alone were given access to government jobs open to Africans.⁴⁰ Ultimate power of course rested with the Belgian authorities, but all lower government jobs were reserved exclusively for Tutsi.⁴¹ Hutu chiefs, of whom there were still many in 1916, were soon replaced by Tutsi, and by the 1930s Tutsi leaders "enjoyed a complete and unprecedented monopoly of 'traditional' leadership positions" within the colony.⁴² Furthermore, higher education was also virtually entirely reserved for Tutsi.⁴³ Under Belgian rule, the only way for any Hutu to "escape relegation to the labouring masses" was to be one of the few allowed to attend a religious seminary, but spots in these were very limited in number.⁴⁴ Denied access to both education and most jobs, the Hutu were thus confined almost entirely to the agricultural sector. This was a heavy blow indeed, as an ever-growing population needed to be supported off an agrarian land base that had not significantly grown since the time of the Germans. Many plots of land were far too small to make a living on, but being barred from access to education or other jobs, the Hutu had little choice but to struggle on.

Under the Belgians, then, the distinction between Hutu and Tutsi became a matter of far greater importance than ever before. At the same time, colonial authorities needed an easy way to differentiate

³⁸ Alison Des Forges, "The Ideology of Genocide," *A Journal of Opinion*, 23 (2), 45.

³⁹ Des Forges, *Leave None to Tell*, 35-36.

⁴⁰ Peter Uvin, *Aiding Violence: The Development Enterprise in Rwanda*, (West Hartford, CT: Kumerian Press, 1998), 16.

⁴¹ Des Forges, *Leave None to Tell*, 35; Uvin, "Ethnicity and Power," 255.

⁴² Article 19, *Broadcasting Genocide: Censorship, Propaganda, and State-Sponsored Violence in Rwanda 1990-1994*, (Article 19, 1996), 4, citing F. Reyntjens, *L'Afrique des Grands Lacs en Crise: Rwanda, Burundi: 1988-1994*, (Paris: Éditions Karthala, 1994), 20; Lemarchand, *Rwanda and Burundi*, 73.

⁴³ Lemarchand, *Rwandan and Burundi*, 74.

⁴⁴ Des Forges, *Leave None to Tell*, 35

between the two groups. Despite the almost ubiquitous colonial references to the physical differences between the Hutu and Tutsi, the stereotypes proved to be quite ineffective for distinguishing between them.⁴⁵ In 1933, therefore, the Belgians began issuing identification cards that declared the ethnic affiliation of the cardholder. Although much has been made of the arbitrariness of the Belgian classification system in recent literature, the consequence of this system was the final destruction of the fluidity between "Hutu" and "Tutsi."⁴⁶ If the discriminatory policies of the Belgians made it extremely difficult for a Hutu man to acquire enough wealth to change his status, as had been possible in pre-colonial times, the identification card system was a tremendous blow, for once one's ethnic affiliation had been recorded, it became bureaucratically impossible to change. Thus, the identity card system provided the final cement that made the wall between Hutu and Tutsi rigid and impermeable, rather than fluid.⁴⁷

In short, under Belgian rule the Tutsi greatly increased their power, and the ordinary Hutu became even more oppressed. Under the multiple-chief system which the Nyiginya kings had introduced in the nineteenth century, there had always been limits on what the chiefs could demand from those under them, for if any chief demanded too much, he would lose all his clients to another nearby chief.⁴⁸ Thus, the large number of chiefs put a check on the power of each and on the extent to which any one could exploit the common people. However, the Belgians abolished this system: rather than having multiple powerful figures in a given locality, there was suddenly only one. With no other nearby chiefs competing for clients, there were virtually no limits on what the new exclusive Tutsi chiefs (for they all

⁴⁵ According to colonial doctrine, the Tutsi was supposedly taller, with thin noses and fairer skin, while the Hutu was short and stocky, with broad noses and dark skin. See Prunier, *The Rwanda Crisis*, 5.

⁴⁶ When making the original classifications, Belgian officials would often turn to such diverse criteria as the width of an individual's nose or the number of cows he owned to make the distinction between Hutu and Tutsi. See Uvin's *Aiding Violence*.

⁴⁷ Des Forges, *Leave None to Tell*, 38.

⁴⁸ Vansina, *Antecedents*, 133.

were Tutsi soon after the Belgian takeover) could demand of those under their authority.⁴⁹ Furthermore, the Belgians introduced laws restricting movement, meaning that moving away from an oppressive chief in order to seek a better alternative was no longer possible.⁵⁰ With a captive and politically powerless populace, the level of exploitation against the Hutu (and poor Tutsi) was greatly increased during Belgian rule.

The identity card system introduced by the Belgians followed from their historical vision, which interpreted Rwanda's past as the story of two separate and unequal races, and this vision became a crucial justification of the Belgians' early discriminatory policies. In colonial schools, Tutsi were taught that they were the rightful rulers of Rwanda and were superior to their Hutu neighbours. Indeed, through the works of men like Alexis Kagame, the Belgian version of Rwandan history became both widely known and accepted by the majority of the Rwandan people.⁵¹ This historical vision, which saw the Tutsi as being descendants of a superior race from Ethiopia, became the ultimate justification of the Belgians' discriminatory policies. As the period of Belgian colonialism drew to an end, however, the dominant viewpoint of the colonial regime began to change in favour of the Hutu.

The Late Colonial Period: 1945-1959

After the Second World War, a shift in thinking led to the emergence of new and competing understandings of Rwanda's past. This change began in the Catholic Church, some of whose clergy began to question the Tutsis' "natural" right to rule, as well as their exclusive hold on education and employment opportunities. Gérard Prunier has identified the increasing number of Flemish missionaries, who identified with the Hutu because of their own second-class status in Belgium, as one of the major

⁴⁹ Des Forges, *Leave None to Tell*, 33-38.

⁵⁰ Des Forges, *Leave None to Tell*, 35.

⁵¹ See Vansina, *Antecedents*, 4 and Prunier, *The Rwanda Crisis*, 36-37. It should also be noted that Alexis Kagame is of no relation to Paul Kagame, the current Rwandan president and leader of the RPF.

causes behind the shift in the Church's thinking.⁵² After the Second World War, this new wave of missionaries slowly began admitting Hutu students to their schools and providing them with jobs in the churches and on the missions. In due course, a Hutu counter-elite began to take shape. This elite, educated and increasingly politically aware, became frustrated with the government's refusal to allow them access to profitable jobs, and began campaigning for political change. Gradually, the colonial government began opening up more positions in secondary schools for Hutu students, and even appointed several Hutu to positions within the administration.⁵³ The very existence of such an educated Hutu elite, however small, weakened the idea that Tutsi were more intelligent and more politically savvy than their Hutu counterparts, and political agitation began soon after the Hutu counter-elite made its appearance. In the mid-1950s, Grégoire Kayibanda, who had been educated within the Church system, formed the *Parti du Mouvement de l'Émancipation Hutu*, or PARMEHUTU, to campaign for Hutu rights. The famous "Hutu Manifesto" followed shortly thereafter in 1957, in which Kayibanda called for Hutu solidarity and the disenfranchisement of the Tutsi.

One of the first things the rising Hutu elite did was create a new historical vision that would not only counter that put forward by the Belgians and the Tutsi, but would also justify their political demands. To do so, they essentially took the colonial view and inverted it. Rather than being the rightful rulers of Rwanda, the Tutsi were now portrayed as foreign invaders, outsiders who had ruthlessly conquered and brutally subjugated the rightful inhabitants of the region, the Hutu. It was now the Hutu who had occupied Rwanda first and who composed the majority of the population. Consequently, it was they who should form the legitimate government of Rwanda. In this view, the Hutu were justified in demanding power and in taking action against the Tutsi, not only as the original occupiers of the land, but also to right the wrongs committed in the past by their Tutsi overlords. In other words, the justification for their actions was historical in nature; it was articulated through a new understanding of

⁵² For a more detailed discussion see Prunier *The Rwanda Crisis*, 44.

⁵³ Des Forges, *Leave None to Tell*, 38.

the past. However, this historical understanding fails to acknowledge the fact that the Twa were the true original inhabitants of the region, nor does it reflect the gradual evolution of the terms "Hutu" and "Tutsi," the colonial role in establishing exclusive and oppressive Tutsi rule, or even the fact that the majority of Tutsi were just as poor as their Hutu neighbours. Thus, it was really no closer to reflecting the reality of Rwanda's past than was the colonial version.

The Tutsi elite reacted poorly to the rise of a Hutu counter-elite and the formation of Hutu political parties such as PARMEHUTU. In the growing tension, the Tutsi elite would have been wise to put forward another historical vision for Rwanda, one that could perhaps persuade the rising tide of discontented Hutu that they were not outsiders and foreigners, but were as Rwandan as the Hutu. Rather than adopting any such historical vision, however, they clung even more fiercely to the old racial interpretations of the Belgians, while forming their own pro-Tutsi party, the *Union Nationale Rwandaise* (UNAR). Extremely conservative, UNAR loudly proclaimed that the Tutsi were the only legitimate rulers of Rwanda and, rallying around this claim, they sought to seize power from the Belgians before Rwanda could be handed over to the Hutu.⁵⁴ Needless to say, this did not endear them to the colonial authorities, nor did UNAR's decision to seek support both from China and from the communist countries at the United Nations in 1959.⁵⁵ The increasing radicalism of UNAR only proved to further alienate the Belgian administrators and convince them that majority rule was the right path.⁵⁶

Rwanda Post-1959

Grégoire Kayibanda and the Hutu Revolution: 1959-1973

The situation in Rwanda continued to deteriorate until at last the Belgian administrators completely withdrew their long-standing allegiance to the Tutsi elite and placed their support firmly

⁵⁴ Prunier, *The Rwanda Crisis*, 46-48.

⁵⁵ Prunier, *The Rwanda Crisis*, 47; Mahmood, Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers: Colonialism, Nativism, and the Genocide in Rwanda*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 120.

⁵⁶ Prunier, *The Rwanda Crisis*, 40-55.

behind the Hutu. With the full support of the Catholic Church, and the more clandestine approval of the Belgian administration, the Hutu Revolution began in 1959. The Tutsi monarch, Kigeli V, was exiled in 1961, and political power passed from the minority Tutsi to the majority Hutu in the same year. Rwanda would officially gain its independence in July 1962 with Grégoire Kayibanda, founder of PARMEHUTU, as its first president, but the intervening years did not pass without violence. A Tutsi-led assault on a Hutu activist in 1959 provoked a riot, which then exploded into widespread violence. When it had finished, hundreds more Tutsi had been massacred, and the majority of Tutsi chiefs had either been killed or forced into exile. A flood of Tutsi refugees also sought safety in neighbouring countries, particularly Uganda. Following the violence, the Belgian authorities proceeded to replace any remaining Tutsi chiefs with Hutu ones, in a move that mirrored their actions several decades before.⁵⁷

The anti-Tutsi violence continued after independence. The first nationwide elections were held in September 1961, and although Grégoire Kayibanda and PARMEHUTU won with over 83% of the vote, the elections were marked by widespread violence against Tutsi.⁵⁸ Following independence, Kayibanda continued this pattern of violence, and many more Tutsi fled the country. For those who remained, the situation was made significantly worse in the early 1960s when groups of these refugees launched a series of attacks on Rwanda. Although only one of these attacks posed any sort of credible threat, the government lost no time in labelling the attacks counter-revolutionary and in instigating more violence against Tutsi throughout the country.⁵⁹ By 1967, only five short years after independence, some 20,000 Tutsi had been killed and more than 300,000 pushed into exile.⁶⁰ The raids may have been a good pretext for continuing the violence against Tutsi civilians, but they were of such low intensity that they were a very insufficient justification for the level of violence instigated by the state. Two such refugee

⁵⁷ Article 19, *Broadcasting Genocide*, 5, citing Reyntjens, *L'Afrique des Grand Lacs*, 27; Prunier, *The Rwanda Crisis*, 48-51.

⁵⁸ Article 19, *Broadcasting Genocide*, 5, citing Reyntjens, *L'Afrique des Grand Lacs*, 27; for a breakdown of the voting, see Prunier, *The Rwanda Crisis*, 51.

⁵⁹ Des Forges, *Leave None to Tell*, 39.

⁶⁰ Prunier, *The Rwanda Crisis*, 62.

raids in 1962 combined took the lives of only six Hutu, yet the government responded by massacring 1000-2000 Tutsi civilians.⁶¹ Anti-Tutsi violence also took place across the country and was not limited to areas affected by what little fighting there was. Nor were the targets of the violence restricted to former members of UNAR or the Tutsi ruling elite, who could legitimately have been considered threats to the new government. Rather, all Tutsi were considered legitimate targets, just by virtue of being Tutsi.⁶² In order to transform the low level threat of the refugee incursions into justification for the slaughter of 20,000 Tutsi civilians, the new Hutu government brought their newly formed historical vision into play.

Before considering this vision, it seems appropriate to mention briefly the situation in Burundi, and the effects it may have had on the Rwandan government's reaction to the refugees' attacks. Although much has been made of the close and seemingly inverted relationship between events in Burundi and Rwanda, it seems that the 1960s were a case of events in Rwanda influencing those in Burundi, rather than the other way around.⁶³ In Burundi, the period immediately following independence was also one of hardening ethnic divides and increasing animosity between Hutu and

⁶¹ Lemarchand, *Rwanda and Burundi*, 217-219.

⁶² Prunier, *The Rwanda Crisis*, 60-64.

⁶³ Until independence, the histories of Rwanda and Burundi are on the surface extremely similar. Both countries contain the same ethnic groups as each other, in largely the same proportions. Both were ruled by first the Germans and then the Belgians, and both were subject to the same colonial historical myths of the superiority of the minority Tutsi. Nevertheless, at independence, Rwanda became a Hutu-dominated republic, while Burundi kept its Tutsi monarchy, at least at first. Post-independence both countries also share a history of ethnic violence, but in Rwanda that violence was virtually always directed against the Tutsi. In Burundi, the Tutsi elite kept political control, largely through their use of fear and repression, and violence was frequently directed against the majority Hutu, sometimes on a massive scale as in 1972. The relationship between Rwanda and Burundi following independence has frequently been described as one of "mirroring." Prunier says that they have been "fated...to be natural mirrors of each other's hopes, woes and transformations," while Uvin argues that the history of violence in both nations has produced a "destructive mirror-like situation" in which "the people of each country saw in the other their worst nightmare." See Prunier, *The Rwandan Crisis*, 198, and Uvin, "Ethnicity and Power," 266, as well as Francis Loft and Frances Loft, "Background to Massacres in Burundi," *Review of African Political Economy*, (43), 88-93.

Tutsi. This finally erupted in violence after a coup attempt by Hutu military officers in 1965.⁶⁴ Instead of triggering further violence in Rwanda, however, Burundi's implosion began just as violence in Rwanda was coming to an end. Indeed, some authors maintain that most state-sponsored violence in Rwanda had already concluded by 1964, a year before violence broke out in Burundi.⁶⁵ Furthermore, other authors cite the arrival of thousands of Tutsi refugees fleeing Rwanda as one of the key factors in the radicalization of ethnic relations within Burundi, and the eventual outbreak of violence there.⁶⁶ Therefore, the anti-Hutu violence which occurred in Burundi in the 1960s cannot be offered as an explanation for the excessive violence used by the Rwandan government in response to attacks by Tutsi refugees.

Rather, Kayibanda and the rest of the PARMEHUTU government took the colonial understanding of Rwanda's past and turned it on its head, using this new inverted myth to justify violence against the Tutsi. Instead of being seen as the natural rulers of Rwanda, the Tutsi were now construed as foreign usurpers of power and oppressors. Furthermore, in light of the refugees' invasions, the crime of threatening the gains of the 1959 revolution could now be added to the list of "Tutsi evils." Thus, violence against them became a means not only of righting past wrongs, of "undoing" the evils the Tutsi had committed in the past, but also of preventing such crimes from being repeated. By making these historically-oriented charges against the Tutsi, the government justified instigating violence in areas unaffected by the fighting. A similar logic was applied to the large degree of looting and land appropriation which occurred during the 1960s.⁶⁷ Hutu were considered justified in seizing their Tutsi neighbours' belongings and property simply because they were Tutsi – "foreigners" and "usurpers" who had no right to land.

⁶⁴ Violence in the countryside by supporters of the coup led to widespread and brutal retaliation against Hutu from the largely Tutsi army. This incident further increased instability in Burundi, which would eventually cause the downfall of the Tutsi monarchy. For a more detailed discussion, see Lemarchand, *Rwanda and Burundi*, 416-418.

⁶⁵ Uvin, "Ethnicity and Power," 256.

⁶⁶ Lemarchand, *Rwandan and Burundi*, 384-390.

⁶⁷ Des Forges, *Leave None to Tell*, 30-40.

The newly independent government of Rwanda, thus, used an inverted version of the colonial historical myths to justify violence. Equally important, however, was the way this violence came to be incorporated into later histories of the 1959-1962 revolution. The reinterpretation of the revolution began with the Kayibanda government, but, much like the colonial myths, it was picked up and continually used by both the Habyarimana government in the 1970s and 1980s and by the genocidal regime in 1994. The 1960s Tutsi attacks from abroad and the ensuing violence allowed successive governments to portray the revolution as a "long and courageous struggle against ruthless forces of [Tutsi] repression."⁶⁸ Not only did this view become a foundational piece of the historical visions of each of the post-independence governments, but attacks by refugee forces were also used time and again as evidence of a Tutsi desire to re-establish their oppressive rule.

However, the portrayal of the revolution as a great struggle against the Tutsi is misleading and greatly obscures the realities of what took place in Rwanda between 1959-1962. Indeed, some scholars question whether these events should even be called a revolution in the first place.⁶⁹ During these years, power did pass from the Tutsi to the Hutu and Rwanda did gain independence from Belgium, but these changes were not accomplished by pro-Hutu forces alone. Rather, they were supported and indeed presided over by both the Catholic Church and Belgian authorities. As pressures mounted in the 1950s, the Belgians appointed Colonel Guy Logiest to "guide" Rwanda toward independence. He increasingly favoured the cause of the Hutu, while the Church outright declared its support for majority rule. As Gérard Prunier, a leading scholar on central Africa, has remarked:

A revolution executed under the direction of a colonial army colonel, with the support of colonial troops and the blessing of an all-powerful Catholic church, which comes out of the "revolution" even more powerful...is a strange one indeed.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Des Forges, *Leave None to Tell*, 39.

⁶⁹ Prunier, *The Rwanda Crisis*, 50 and 345-350.

⁷⁰ Prunier, *The Rwanda Crisis*, 348. Although scholars differ on the degree of Belgian support for the Hutu cause, they all agree it was considerable, both politically and militarily. See for instance, Des Forges, *Leave None to Tell*, 39 and Catharine Newbury, "Ethnicity and the Politics of History in Rwanda," *Africa Today* 45(1), 1998.

Clearly, the revolution was not the "long and courageous struggle" which all subsequent Hutu governments would describe it to be. The violence of the years immediately following the revolution was not a glorious struggle against the forces of Tutsi repression – as it came construed to be – nor even a fight against those who wished to overthrow the "revolution." Instead, the violence of the 1960s was the reaction of the Kayibanda government to the small-scale attacks of a ragtag band of refugees, which they used as a pretext to justify vicious attacks on the Tutsi minority.

Many observers attest that under Kayibanda's government, discrimination was rampant throughout Rwanda. After 1967, the anti-Tutsi violence calmed down, but state-sponsored discrimination against them did not. The identification cards which had been used under the colonial regime to discriminate against Hutu were now turned against the Tutsi and used to deprive them of education, employment and land.⁷¹ However, the Tutsi were not the only ones disadvantaged under Kayibanda's rule. President Kayibanda and many other high officials came from the south of Rwanda, and they distinctly favoured those from their home regions to the disadvantage of Hutu from the north. Increasingly, northerners began to resent the southerners who "monopoliz[ed] the benefits of power," and a significant regional rift widened among the Hutu.⁷²

Amid this ever-growing split within the Hutu population, anti-Tutsi violence and persecution once again broke out in the early 1970s. Tutsi were expelled from schools and fired from whatever jobs they had managed to maintain in the public service.⁷³ In the waves of violence that ensued, hundreds of Tutsi were killed and thousands more fled the country.⁷⁴ At the same time, neighbouring Burundi also descended into chaos after a Hutu rebellion in April 1972 led to a two month long "selective

⁷¹ Des Forges, *Leave None to Tell*, 40; Lemarchand, *Rwanda and Burundi*, 275.

⁷² Des Forges, *Leave None to Tell*, 40.

⁷³ Article 19, *Broadcasting Genocide*, 5-6.

⁷⁴ Article 19, *Broadcasting Genocide*, 5-6.

genocide."⁷⁵ Undoubtedly the violence in each country influenced that of the other, but the exact relationship between them remains unclear. Indeed, it is not even clear which Hutu began the violence in Rwanda, but Alison Des Forges describes the chaos this way:

Some attributed the attacks to [Hutu] southerners who hoped to minimize differences with [Hutu] northerners by reminding them of a common enemy; others laid them to northerners who hoped to create sufficient disorder to legitimate a coup d'état by the army....Regardless of which group had initiated the campaign, the tactic was clear: seek to resolve differences among Hutu at the expense of the Tutsi.⁷⁶

The Habyarimana Years: 1973-1989

In the midst of this chaos, a group of northern Hutu military officers did indeed launch a coup, and as a result General Juvénal Habyarimana became president in July 1973. Although fifty of the major leaders from the Kayibanda regime were executed or died in prison, the coup was otherwise bloodless, and Habyarimana successfully halted the anti-Tutsi violence and restored social order to Rwanda.⁷⁷ The coup represented a major shift in the regional distribution of power, but not in the ruling philosophy or historical understanding of the government. Rwanda's past was still uniformly presented by the new government as a straightforward story of Hutu oppression at the hands of the foreign Tutsi. However, during Habyarimana's early years overt violence against Tutsis was either greatly lessened or eliminated. Instead, Habyarimana opted for a system of legalized discrimination to redress the alleged historical wrongs of the Tutsi.

Habyarimana instituted a quota system that governed the number of Tutsi who were allowed access to both higher education and employment. Ostensibly this system was put in place "to assure equitable distribution of resources and opportunities to all Rwandans," but in reality it was used to

⁷⁵ The anti-Hutu violence in Burundi reached such a massive level that it is now estimated that between 100,000-150,000 Hutu were killed, including virtually all educated Hutu. See Uvin, "Ethnicity and Power," 258, and Loft and Loft, "Background to Massacres," 91.

⁷⁶ Des Forges, *Leave None to Tell*, 40-41.

⁷⁷ Des Forges, *Leave None to Tell*, 41.

legally discriminate against the Tutsi.⁷⁸ The quotas, which were supposed to correspond to the share of the population that each group made up, were in fact much lower for the Tutsi than they should have been.⁷⁹ Furthermore, a great deal of power was invested in the local burgomasters, who controlled both employment within their communes and student placement in the secondary schools.⁸⁰ These burgomasters could, and often did, use their power to further discriminate against Tutsi and deny them jobs which, even under the quota system, they should have been entitled to.⁸¹ The ultimate justification for all this discrimination was the official, but simplistic historical vision promulgated since independence. The official perception was that the Tutsi had not only wrongly taken jobs and schooling opportunities from Hutu in the past, but they were also foreigners to Rwanda, and therefore not entitled to anything.

This situation remained largely unchanged until the late 1980s, when a wave of major crises led the Habyarimana government to alter its tactics. The first was agricultural. Food production stagnated though the 1980s, when overpopulation in relation to food supply was already a major problem. By 1990 Rwanda was the most densely populated country in Africa, with 271 people per square kilometre.⁸² Living conditions were already precarious before international coffee prices plummeted in the mid-1980s, which faced Rwanda with a severe financial crisis as well.⁸³ Coffee was Rwanda's main export crop, and the falling prices led to ever-increasing foreign debt and to rising domestic poverty. The debt problems caused the World Bank and International Monetary Fund to step in, and they imposed a phased Structural Adjustment Program that began in 1990.⁸⁴ Not surprisingly, the political situation

⁷⁸ Des Forges, *Leave None to Tell*, 46.

⁷⁹ Uvin, *Aiding Violence*, 32-34.

⁸⁰ Des Forges, *Leave None to Tell*, 41-42.

⁸¹ Prunier, *The Rwanda Crisis*, 52.

⁸² By 1990, Rwanda's population density was higher than that of India, and almost twice that of China. For more information see the United Nations Development Programme, <http://esa.un.org/unpp/p2k0data.asp>.

⁸³ Uvin, *Aiding Violence*, 42-60.

⁸⁴ Catharine Newbury and David Newbury, "A Catholic Mass in Kigali: Contested Views of the Genocide and Ethnicity in Rwanda," *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, 1999, 300-302; Uvin, *Aiding Violence*, 50-60. On the World Bank SAP's conditions, see Prunier, *The Rwanda Crisis*, 160.

within Rwanda also became increasingly strained, with more and more demands for an end to the one-party system and to Habyarimana's exclusive control of power.

The Prelude: October 1990-March 1994

Into this increasingly dire and volatile situation came the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF). Formed in 1987 among Tutsi refugees in Uganda, the RPF was dedicated to resolving the refugee crisis, by whatever means necessary. The Habyarimana government had consistently refused to discuss the possibility of repatriating the refugees, who by this time numbered more than 600,000, and the RPF became increasingly vocal in its criticism of Habyarimana's authoritarian government.⁸⁵ On 1 October 1990, the RPF invaded Rwanda from Uganda. Many have since questioned the timing of the invasion, seeing the attack as an attempt to pre-empt the domestic political initiatives occurring in Rwanda; but, whatever the reasons behind it, the effect of the RPF invasion was immediate.⁸⁶

Habyarimana's power base had been crumbling for some time as a result both of the multiple social and economic crises and of growing political pressure from opposition parties. The RPF invasion, although not at first a significant military threat, presented Habyarimana with a chance to solidify his support and unite Rwandans against a common enemy. Indeed, the majority of Rwandans – both Hutu and Tutsi – initially responded to the invasion by supporting Habyarimana, but "rather than rely on a spontaneous coalescing of support from all sides, Habyarimana decided to pursue a more forceful strategy, to sacrifice the Tutsi in hopes of uniting all Hutu behind him."⁸⁷ Thus, the invasion of October 1990 was followed almost immediately by a wave of nearly 10,000 Tutsi arrests.⁸⁸ Those arrested were labelled "accomplices"; and, although most were released several months later, many were subjected to torture, and others died while imprisoned.⁸⁹ The harassment of Tutsi, as well as of opposition Hutu,

⁸⁵ Catharine Newbury, "Background to Genocide: Rwanda," *A Journal of Opinion* 23(3), 13.

⁸⁶ Jones, *Peacemaking in Rwanda*, 18-45.

⁸⁷ Des Forges, *Leave None to Tell*, 49.

⁸⁸ Uvin, "Ethnicity and Power," 260.

⁸⁹ Des Forges, *Leave None to Tell*, 49; Uvin, "Ethnicity and Power," 260.

continued in the years leading up to the genocide in 1994. Violence on the streets also increased as the youth wings of various Hutu political parties became armed and as both internal and external pressure on the Habyarimana regime became more extreme.

At the same time, the civil war greatly increased in intensity, with the well-disciplined RPF guerrilla forces under General Paul Kagame becoming an ever-more serious threat to the Habyarimana government. In July 1992, the two sides met for negotiations in Arusha, Tanzania, and a peace agreement was finally signed on 4 August 1993. The period preceding this fragile peace was extremely important for laying the ideological and philosophical groundwork for the renewed warfare and genocide that was to come. From the very beginning of the civil war, Habyarimana's government had already begun to target Tutsi as the "enemy within," but this language was soon kicked into high gear. It would no longer do to simply discriminate against the Tutsi as foreigners who, according to the official narrative, did not deserve education or employment. Instead, the government now needed all Tutsi to be identified as the primary enemy facing Rwanda. For Habyarimana, ordinary Hutu needed to be convinced that their Tutsi neighbours were evil, conniving and all collectively guilty of any and all crimes supposedly committed by the RPF. To accomplish this, the regime once again turned to historical arguments.

The heightened identification of the Tutsi as "the enemy" had begun in the army. Then Chief of Staff, Colonel Déogratias Nsabimana, wrote an important memorandum on 21 September 1992, well into the ongoing Arusha negotiations, in which he detailed ways to identify the enemy. According to Nsabimana, the principal enemy was "the Tutsi inside or outside the country, extremist and nostalgic for power, who have NEVER recognized and will NEVER recognize the realities of the 1959 social revolution and who wish to reconquer power by all means necessary, including arms."⁹⁰ This memorandum, which was widely circulated in the army, is relevant to our discussion for several reasons. Not only does it

⁹⁰ As quoted in Des Forges, *Leave None to Tell*, 62.

identify all Tutsi as the enemy, but the reasons it proffers for this designation are historical in nature. The Tutsi are presented as "nostalgic" for the power they once held, a power which, according to post-independence historical doctrine, they had only attained by robbing and oppressing the Hutu. In spite of the fact that post-1959 the Tutsi had themselves become an oppressed and politically marginal minority, they were still being portrayed as ruthless oppressors, with the RPF now seen as leading the effort to restore the monarchy.

Furthermore, the 1992 memorandum also showcases how the reinterpretation of the revolution, begun under Kayibanda, came to be used against the Tutsi. According to the Kayibanda government's version of history, the Tutsi had violently resisted the 1959 revolution, and the Hutu had overcome their oppression in a long and glorious struggle. In the early 1990s the rhetoric of this struggle appeared again, this time with a vengeance. But in light of the current threat from the mostly-Tutsi RPF, Habyarimana found it necessary to change the story of the revolution once again.⁹¹ The supposed resistance of the Tutsi in 1959 was now superimposed onto the entire period since then, and the Tutsi were portrayed as having been in a continual state of resistance to the revolution for the last thirty years. Yet, although some Tutsi (particularly UNAR) had certainly resisted the original turnover of power, the violence of the 1960s was largely engineered by the Kayibanda government itself, and domestic Tutsi opposition under Habyarimana had been virtually nonexistent, so effective were his policies of marginalization.⁹² Thus, painting the Tutsi as continually resisting the revolution from 1959 until the 1990s was a huge distortion of the past.

Unfortunately, this new version of Rwanda's past was not confined to military memoranda. It found its way frequently into government propaganda and into the ostensibly free press, including the

⁹¹ The majority of RPF members have always been Tutsi, especially Tutsi from the refugee community in Uganda, but from its inception, the leaders of the RPF have taken great pains to recruit Hutu members and to emphasize that the RPF is a Rwandan organization, not a Tutsi one. In the early 1990s, they also took care to include prominent Hutus within the leadership structure of the RPF, including Colonel Alexis Kanyarengwe, who was the chairman of the movement. For a more detailed discussion, see Des Forges, *Leave None to Tell*, 692-697.

⁹² Article 19, *Broadcasting Genocide*, 5.

understanding of Tutsi origins to be correct, the Tutsi had been living side by side with the Hutu, largely in peace, for hundreds of years was overridden by the historical vision now being embraced by the Habyarimana government.

Another key part of the historical arguments made by Habyarimana's circle was the past evil deeds of the Tutsi. The wrongs committed by Tutsi, both in the far and recent past, were constantly cited, not only to vilify the Tutsi, but also to justify all manner of oppressive action against them. In propaganda pieces much reference was made to Kanjogera, the Tutsi queen who, during her reign in the last half of the nineteenth century, supposedly kept two Hutu children on either side of her throne so that she could thrust a sword into them to help her up.⁹⁷ This was one of the more sensational examples of past Tutsi evils cited by the government and pro-Hutu forces, but it was by no means the only one. An article entitled "A Cockroach Cannot Give Birth to a Butterfly," which appeared in *Kangura* in March 1993, read as follows:

We began by saying that a cockroach cannot give birth to a butterfly. It is true. A cockroach gives birth to another cockroach ...The history of Rwanda shows us clearly that a Tutsi stays always exactly the same, that he has never changed. The malice, the evil are just as we knew them in the history of our country. We are not wrong in saying that a cockroach gives birth to another cockroach. Who could tell the difference between the Inyenzi [cockroaches] who attacked in October 1990 and those of the 1960s. They are all linked ... their evilness is the same. The unspeakable crimes of the Inyenzi of today ...recall those of their elders: killing, pillaging, raping girls and women, etc.⁹⁸

Extrapolating from the RPF invasion, this article's unmistakably historical argument rails against all Tutsi, and indeed holds up all of Rwandan history as evidence that the Tutsi were evil in the past and always would be.

References to the evils of Tutsi rule, or to "feudalism," were ubiquitous in the early 1990s. From the very first days of the civil war, "officials and propagandists alike warned that the RPF had come to re-establish their total Tutsi control over the Hutu," and military officers were ordered to spread the

⁹⁷ Des Forges, *Leave None to Tell*, 73.

⁹⁸ As found in Des Forges, *Leave None to Tell*, 73-74.

word to civilians "that the RPF had attacked to restore the monarchy."⁹⁹ One *Kangura* article accused the RPF, and by extension all Tutsi, of fighting for "the extension of a Nilotic empire from Ethiopia."¹⁰⁰ These claims undoubtedly gained some credence due to the savage events which occurred in Burundi in 1993. The country's first Hutu president, Melchior Ndadaye, was assassinated in October of that year, leading to waves of anti-Tutsi violence from his enraged supporters. Burundi's Tutsi-dominated army then stepped in, brutally massacring approximately 50,000 Hutu in retaliation.¹⁰¹ Extremists in Rwanda immediately began to use Ndadaye's death and the ensuing violence as further proof of the evil nature of all Tutsi.¹⁰²

The government's use of historical arguments to justify violence against the Tutsi also included its attempts to explain itself to the international community. The targeting of Tutsi civilians during the civil war did draw some international attention and criticism, although to a very limited degree. Indeed, given that Rwanda had the highest concentration of development workers and NGOs in Africa, the international community did very little to protest the killings of thousands of Tutsi civilians there from 1990 to 1993.¹⁰³ When pressed to explain itself, however, the Habyarimana government took two different approaches. The first was to simply point, much as they did inside Rwanda itself, to past evils supposedly committed by the Tutsi and to argue that those were worse than the recent violence. Alison Des Forges describes this method thus:

When the government was criticized for killing Tutsi in the years before the genocide, officials and propagandists alike tried to demonstrate that the Tutsi had slaughtered more than the Hutu. In September 1991, the pro-Habyarimana publication *La Medaille Nyiramacibiri* discounted reports that Hutu officials had been responsible for killing Tutsi and offered instead to give readers lists of the Hutu killed by Tutsi so "then you will know who are the real criminals."¹⁰⁴

⁹⁹ Des Forges, *Leave None to Tell*, 76.

¹⁰⁰ As found in Des Forges, *Leave None to Tell*, 79-80.

¹⁰¹ Prunier, *The Rwanda Crisis*, 197-201.

¹⁰² Prunier, *The Rwanda Crisis*, 197-201.

¹⁰³ Uvin, *Aiding Violence*, 35-50; Des Forges, *Leave None to Tell*, 81; Uvin, "Ethnicity and Power," 260.

¹⁰⁴ Des Forges, *Leave None to Tell*, 81.

The other approach was to present a "deeper" historical view of the killings, one that Habyarimana knew the international community would easily buy into. That is, they portrayed the violence as the product of ancient "tribal" hatreds, unchanging and almost eternal in nature.¹⁰⁵ This view was of course entirely false, but it largely succeeded in quelling international unease about the human rights situation in Rwanda.¹⁰⁶

The Genocide: April - July 1994

On 6 April 1994, President Habyarimana's plane was shot down over Kigali, killing both him and the new president of Burundi, Cyprien Ntaryamira. Theories on who shot down the plane variously include claims that it was the RPF, hardliners within Habyarimana's own government, and even the French. Chances are we will never know who was responsible. Regardless of who did it, Habyarimana's death was the catalyst that began the genocide. Within hours of the crash, roadblocks were set up throughout Kigali, and the killings had begun.¹⁰⁷ The first victims were not only Tutsi, but also important moderate Hutu, such as Prime Minister Agathe Uwilingiyimana, the legitimate head of government after the president's death. A small group of radicals within the army and the Habyarimana government, probably led by Colonel Theoneste Bagosora, essentially took control of the central government and were instrumental in both planning and implementing the genocide. When news of the killings reached the RPF, they threatened to resume the war if the slaughter was not stopped. On the evening of 7 April, only a day after Habyarimana's assassination, the RPF invaded, and the struggle began to overthrow the genocidal regime. What was to follow was three months of brutal slaughter, organized by the proponents of Hutu-power, resulting in the deaths of between 500,000 and 1,000,000 Tutsi

¹⁰⁵ Des Forges, *Leave None to Tell*, 91.

¹⁰⁶ Des Forges, *Leave None to Tell*, 91.

¹⁰⁷ Prunier, *The Rwanda Crisis*, 212-230.

Rwandans.¹⁰⁸ Moderate Hutus and persons of mixed ancestry were also killed throughout. The RPF was finally victorious and brought a halt to the killings at the end of July 1994.

One of the hallmarks of the Rwandan genocide was the level of mass participation in the slaughter. Neighbour turned against neighbour, and even relative against relative, to an extent which has never really been seen before or since. The reasons individuals decided to kill were extremely varied, from fear of retribution to the lure of looting and stealing the property of one's victims.¹⁰⁹ Hardline Hutu propaganda, which was to play a crucial role in the genocide, continued in much the same vein during the genocide as it had done since the original RPF invasion in 1990, but with a few additions. Most notably, Habyarimana's assassination was added to the list of Tutsi evils and presented as proof positive of the deviousness and brutality of the Tutsi.¹¹⁰ On the radio, announcers on the infamous Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines (RTLM) continuously "replayed all the now familiar messages of hate: the inherent differences between Hutu and Tutsi, the numerical superiority of the Hutu ...the cleverness of the Tutsi in infiltration, their cruelty, their cohesiveness, their intention to restore past repression, the risk they posed to the gains of the 1959 revolution."¹¹¹

The ultimate justification for the genocide, however, was always the war with the RPF. The language of the war was used at virtually every level during the genocide, from Colonel Bagosora down to the individual perpetrators themselves. In interviews with confessed and convicted genocidaires, Scott Straus found that fear of the war and of the consequences of a Tutsi victory was a consistent and powerful motivator towards violence during the genocide.¹¹² The government played on this constantly,

¹⁰⁸ Scott Straus, *The Order of Genocide*, (London : Cornell University Press, 2006), 51.

¹⁰⁹ See Scott Straus's *The Order of Genocide and Intimate Enemy: Images and Voices of the Rwandan Genocide* (New York, Zone Books, 2006).

¹¹⁰ Des Forges, *Leave None to Tell*, 252.

¹¹¹ Des Forges, *Leave None to Tell*, 250-256.

¹¹² See the interviews collected in Straus, *The Order of Genocide* and his *Intimate Enemy*. Surprisingly, Straus also found that events in Burundi the year before did not play a large role as a motivator towards violence among the rank and file perpetrators he interviewed. Although they were often aware of President Ndadaye's death and the massacres which followed in 1993, they did not indicate that these were important factors in their decision to participate in the genocide. Rather, they explained their participation largely in terms of their fear of the RPF and

and Hutu were frequently called upon to kill Tutsi as an act of "self-defence."¹¹³ Throughout the three months of slaughter, the genocide, phrased and packaged in the language of war, was presented as an integral part of the war effort.¹¹⁴

One key reason why this method proved so effective rests with the fact that the government had been putting forward its own version of history for years. By the time the genocide began in April 1994, nearly four years after the initial RPF invasion, the distorted understanding of history being broadcast from every government outlet had thoroughly coloured the war with the RPF in the minds of Rwandans. No longer was the conflict about the return of refugees or even about political reform. Instead, the war had become cemented in the minds of Hutu Rwandans as a monumental battle between Hutu and Tutsi, with the Tutsi portrayed as evil foreigners who had been lying in wait for decades, hoping for their chance to once more subjugate the Hutu. Except for those in areas actually affected by fighting between RPF and government forces, the actual threat from the war was limited and, particularly in areas far from the battles between army units, the probability that one's Tutsi neighbours had any contact with the RPF or in any way constituted a threat was small indeed. However, the attested prevalence of fear and the widespread belief that the genocide would in fact help the war effort shows how effective government propagandists were at convincing people of the legitimacy of their distorted view of history.¹¹⁵ The historical vision crafted by Habyarimana's circle during the early 1990s allowed the leaders of the genocide to fundamentally redefine the civil war in their terms and to turn that definition into a powerful motivator towards genocidal violence.

There is one further, and perhaps even more significant way, in which the justification for the genocide revolved around historical understandings; that is, the way the planners of the genocide

their belief that the genocide would help ensure the RPF's defeat. How much the events in Burundi may have influenced those who planned the genocide, such as Colonel Bagosora, remains unclear.

¹¹³ Des Forges, *Leave None to Tell*, 407.

¹¹⁴ Des Forges, *Leave None to Tell*, 404-405.

¹¹⁵ See the interviews collected in Straus, *The Order of Genocide* and his *Intimate Enemy*.

justified the genocide to themselves. The genocide was intended to wipe Rwanda clean of the Tutsi, to create a solely Hutu nation. It was the "final solution" to the Tutsi problem that would at last remove them as a threat to Hutu power.¹¹⁶ The Tutsi had been harassed, discriminated against and massacred in the past, and yet they were still there, and in the form of the RPF at least, a serious threat. Thus, to those who planned the genocide, the extermination of the Tutsi came to be seen as a way of finally and irrevocably righting past wrongs. Indeed, the genocide can be understood not only as an attempt to wipe out the last vestiges of the Tutsi, but also as an effort to write a brutal conclusion to the narratives of Hutu-Tutsi conflict so long propagated by successive Rwandan governments.

Conclusion

Before German colonization, history had played a prominent role in the governing ideology of the Nyiginya kingdom, and historical precedent was repeatedly used to justify various actions in the present, including warfare. The differentiation between Hutu and Tutsi begun under this kingdom was greatly increased during the nineteenth century, particularly with the imposition of *uburetwa* labour contracts which only applied to farming families. However, colonialism dramatically redefined the nature of the Hutu-Tutsi divide as a racial separation, rather than as a fluid boundary between socio-economic groups, as previously. First the German and then the Belgian authorities adopted the myth of Rwanda's two "races," with eventually disastrous consequences.

To justify their biased and discriminatory policies in favour of the Tutsi, both colonial regimes adopted a new historical vision for Rwanda, one that saw the Tutsi as great conquerors from Ethiopia who were racially closer to the Europeans and thus entitled to rule. During the Hutu Revolution, this colonial historical myth was inverted, with the newly independent Hutu regime thus proclaiming the Tutsi to be foreign invaders and oppressors, who had no right to live in central Africa. This new historical vision, no more reflective of past realities than that of the colonizers, was used to justify both mass

¹¹⁶ Des Forges, *Leave None to Tell*, 250-256.

violence under Grégoire Kayibanda's government and legalized discrimination under the regime of Juvénal Habyarimana.

In the early 1990s, the propaganda against the Tutsi became more extreme in response to the multiple crises facing the Rwandan government. This propaganda relied heavily on the older historical arguments about the past evils of the Tutsi, but also created some new ones. The rhetoric of the revolution, which had hailed it as a great and glorious struggle, was once again brought to the forefront, but Tutsis as a whole were now portrayed as having been in a constant state of rebellion against the revolution ever since 1959. Once the genocide began, the civil war became the ultimate justifier of the violence, but by that point the government had already completely repackaged the war in the language of its own historical myths.

The genocide occurred for diverse structural reasons. The reasons individuals chose to participate in the killing were even more varied, but in Alison Des Forges' words, "beneath the individual motivations lay a common fear rooted in firmly held but mistaken ideas of the Rwandan past."¹¹⁷ This was true not only of the genocide of 1994, but also of virtually every outbreak of violence in Rwanda dating back to colonial times. Thus, at multiple times in Rwandan history, political power holders have tweaked or completely changed their historical visions in order to justify violence and discrimination. Much of the time, these historical visions had little to do with the realities of the Rwandan past, or even the Rwandan present, yet they still proved to be effective motivators of violence. Thus, it can be seen that political power-holders in Rwanda placed history squarely in the center of their "drums," which they then used to both legitimize their rule and to marshal the Rwandan people towards violence and discrimination.

¹¹⁷ Des Forges, *Leave None to Tell*, 31.

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