

# Conversation between Jean-Pierre Karegeye and Boubacar Boris Diop about the Tutsi Genocide in Rwanda

Boubacar Boris Diop, Jean-Pierre Karegeye

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Why does it seem that the genocide deniers have perked up? What can we make about African indifference on this subject? This conversation between writer Boubacar Boris Diop and scholar Jean-Pierre Karegeye was first published in French in Senepius, Beninplus, and Camepius. In this English version, authors extended their discussion on Césaire's thought. Jean-Pierre Karegeye teaches in the United States. He has published extensively on francophone African literature, the Tutsi genocide, child soldiers and religious extremism. He recently co-edited a book, *Religion in War and Peace in Africa* (Routledge, 2020). He is also interested in the theoretical frameworks and ethical dimensions of testimonial

narratives. In the following interview, he chats with his friend Boubacar Boris Diop, a Senegalese writer, author of several novels including *Murambi*, *The Book of Bones*, about the Tutsi genocide, a topic on which he has also published many articles over the last twenty years.

Boubacar Boris Diop : Jean-Pierre, from time to time the genocide against the Tutsi of Rwanda makes the headlines again, but only briefly. And quite often it is only for comparing the genocide's importance, or even rewriting its history when a new film or book is released, or a political event occurs such as the arrest of Paul Rusesabagina. This is why, for some time now, when I talk to my Rwandan friends about their country, I want to ask them a very simple question, a ques-

tion that can be summed up in a few words : "What's going on? Why does it seem that genocide deniers, from whom we haven't heard in years, seem to have perked up suddenly?" I would like to know how someone like you, a Rwandan intellectual who is primarily concerned by this tragedy and who is known to have thought and written a lot about the genocide against Tutsi in Rwanda, feels about all this.

Jean-Pierre Karegeye : Thank you very much, Boris. I would like to start with the last part of your question, the fact that I am a Rwandan intellectual. Everyone will easily understand that my perception of Rwanda cannot be that of a researcher who stands far away from the object that he is observing. That is impossible for me. I inhabit Rwanda as much as Rwanda inhabits me with its past and present, where the horrors of the genocide and the hopes of an entire people intertwine. I would even add that the destiny of my homeland haunts me and that I feel like each of my compatriots, as well as Rwanda's soul, in constant revival. "What's happening?" you ask. Your perplexity echoes that of the Rwandan historian, José Kagabo, who, wondering about the legacy of the genocide, asked the following question : "Where did what happened in 1994 go?" This was in 2014, in his introduction to a special issue on the Tutsi genocide in the

journal *Les Temps Modernes*. Linking the two questions, his and yours, we come to this conclusion : After the genocide comes the denial. I also realize that "never again" remains a pious hope, and that the world, Africa, and Rwanda's neighboring countries have learned nothing from this immense tragedy. What is dangerous is the hatred against the Tutsi that is sweeping through the Great Lakes region. The pyramid of hate created by the Anti-Defamation League shows a precise link between genocide and hatred.

Boubacar Boris Diop : The "Anti-Defamation League" was created to fight antisemitism. Can you elaborate a little more on the pyramid of hate in Rwanda specifically?

Jean-Pierre Karegeye : Yes, the "Anti-Defamation League," created in 1913 by Sigmund Livingston, has historically fought against anti-Semitism and has since committed to justice and fair treatment for all. Its pyramid of hate or discrimination is built on five levels, starting with cultural biases and escalating with genocide at the top.

I also believe that we cannot separate hatred from genocide denial. One of the great things about this organization is its commitment to laws that punish hate crimes. For example, it was involved in the adoption of the 2009 US Hate Crimes Prevention Act.

When you deny genocide, you

continue to harass survivors wherever they are. It adds insult to injury. Those that deny genocide twist the same machete into the unhealed wounds of survivors.

Boubacar Boris Diop : This leaves me sincerely and deeply puzzled. I would like to come back to this point, I mean to the genocide denial that is both unapologetic and insidious these days. Why now? And why is it suddenly openly gaining momentum again?

Jean-Pierre Karegeye : It is a fact that genocide denial is openly getting stronger nowadays. It is true that with the victory of the Rwandan Patriotic Front and the creation of the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, that the genocidaires had to keep a low profile. In a way, they hid out while waiting for better days until they could return to the public sphere. Or perhaps we underestimated their underground work. Social media now gives them great visibility, and it shows, almost three decades later, that the world's indifference during the genocide has remained intact.

Boubacar Boris Diop : Yet, like many people who have worked on the genocide of the Tutsi in Rwanda, I was certain at one point that the question regarding who the perpetrators were and who the victims were had been definitively settled... Was it just an illusion?

Jean-Pierre Karegeye : Not necessarily. We can say at least though that the dividing line between the perpetrator and the victim was clearly drawn. This goes back to Primo Levi, who is clear on this : "The oppressor remains what he is, and so does the victim; they are not interchangeable." Genocide itself created the two categories. Confusion or the reversal of roles is one of the strategies of genocide denial. What remains, on the other hand, is this genocide denial that represents a shift, not a rupture, in genocidal paradigm. Although it may seem paradoxical, genocide denial is a proof of genocide. It affirms what it denies. In other words, there would have been no genocide denial had there been no genocide. Genocide denial does not come from nowhere.

Boubacar Boris Diop : What role should research play in this awareness? What do you think of investigations and clarification work done by artists of various origins and intellectuals from various scholarly disciplines?

Jean-Pierre Karegeye : For me, they are first and foremost men and women of good will. They reacted to the Rwandan tragedy by placing themselves at the highest human level. Many of them played a decisive role. I am thinking for example of the project "Writing as Duty to Memory", of your novel, *Murambi*, *The*

Book of Bones, of Koulsy Lamko's book, *A Butterfly in the Hills*, as well as of publications by scholars and survivors. I believe that the fictional works that resulted from the "Writing as Duty to Memory" project have greatly contributed to teaching about the genocide in European and American universities.

But the status of intellectuals or artists does not matter so much. They mainly are, above all, "human beings of good will." Moreover, we all know that some intellectuals and artists took part in the genocide and that others became advocates of genocide denial. Léon Mugesera has a Ph.D. in linguistics from Université Laval in Quebec City and Ferdinand Nahimana, co-founder of the sinister RTLM, the Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines, has a Ph.D. in history from Université Paris-Diderot. Charles Onana is now a doctor thanks to his genocide denial tropisms. He defended his thesis in Lyon in 2017 on "Opération Turquoise". There is much to be said about the relationship of, on the one hand, the genocide and, on the other, rationality, ethics, and aesthetics.

Boubacar Boris Diop : The fact is, the tiniest details of the 1994 genocide ended up being known by almost everyone. And since then, the historical sequence started by the first killings of 1959 in Rwanda has revealed all its secrets to us. We can

thus conclude that the massacre of more than a million human beings ended up imposing itself as a massive, undeniable reality on the universal conscience.

Jean-Pierre Karegeye : I sense in your words a willingness to remain optimistic about the human race despite everything. I do not share your optimism; in my opinion, the idea that humanity has finally realized the extent of the genocide of the Tutsi should be put into perspective. Awareness of the horrors of the genocide was made possible above all by the victory of the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF). This was not only a military victory. It also unveiled the lies and forgeries of the genocidal ideology, forcing its theorists to remain speechless in the face of survivors' testimonies, which came to be considered as legitimate, truthful and accepted by all. The RPF's victory was first and foremost of the rehabilitation of meaning. At what point is this universal conscience supposed to have appeared? When the genocide in Rwanda was officially recognized and an International Criminal Tribunal was established? It was, once again, after the victory of the RPF. To cite just one example, universal conscience has never challenged us about the Herero genocide in Namibia by the Germans. But I do not lose hope. Universal conscience towards the genocide is formed, like

other things, through education on values just as much as through the common fight against genocide denial.

Boubacar Boris Diop : What are the different forms of denial of the Tutsi genocide?

Jean-Pierre Karegeye : There are several. At least five. Generally speaking, the first form of genocide-denial is expressed through the notion of inter-ethnic war. It is a theory that considers genocide as a violent confrontation between communities. This theory of inter-ethnic war aims to invalidate any idea of planning. It also erases the dividing line between victims and executioners, which leads to arguments such as : “There are not victims on one side and executioners on the other.” This is also the explanation given by those who planned the genocide. Denying the facts allowed them to deny their obvious responsibility. The second form of denial explains everything that happened after the plane crash of April 6, 1994, with a genocide denial syllogism. We operate here by substitution and analogy in the following statement : “The RPF killed President Habyarimana. The death of President Habyarimana is the cause of the genocide.” Therefore “the RPF is responsible for the genocide.” It angered the people, and many wanted to get revenge on the executioners, meaning the soldiers of the Rwandan Pa-

triotic Front (RPF) and by extension all the Tutsi. This form of denial does not necessarily deny the genocide but looks for culprits elsewhere. The third approach to genocide denial compensates for the limits of the second. Faced with the recognition of the Tutsi genocide by the international community, genocide denial subtly redefines itself through the inflation of genocides, which we see in statements of “double genocide” or multiple genocides. This is why Louis Bagilishya speaks of an “ecumenical genocide.” The fourth form of genocide denial is ideological and institutional. It is deployed in institutional spaces. It is, for example, the realpolitik that prevented the Clinton administration from using the word genocide for fear of feeling obligated to intervene in Rwanda after the death of sixteen American soldiers a few months before on African soil in Mogadishu. That is the famous Somalia syndrome. French governments continue to deny the responsibility of the French state. A more serious case is that of the Catholic Church. There are those who believe that the Church is the symbol of all human virtues and that it cannot have been directly responsible for anything. Accepting its responsibility would go against the idea of the holiness of the Church. Fortunately, it is possible to recognize the sins of the Church through its followers without questioning the holi-

ness of Christ. I think that John Paul II and Pope Francis were very clear regarding the sins of the genocide. Finally, there is an extension of denial that consists of denying Rwanda success story or attacking Rwanda and Rwandans where it hurts : denying the genocide.

Boubacar Boris Diop : What strikes me is that, among other things, we are dealing with a kind of paradoxical genocide denial that affirms the reality of the horror much more than it denies it. It does not say that genocide did not happen ; on the contrary, it argues that everyone has killed everyone, which makes the tragedy a zero-sum game. And, of course, out of vanity, we invoke freedom of speech, the courage to say out loud what others mutter to themselves. It is disturbing to note that genocide denial is easily expressed in places where it should be condemned instead.

Jean-Pierre Karegeye : It's exactly that, unfortunately. A Catholic priest involved in the genocide, who has become a genocide denier, still says mass with no qualms ; politicians in the countries neighboring Rwanda compete, not in presenting social projects, but by denouncing Tutsi population from their countries in portraying them as "harmful and foreigners," in the hope of being re-elected ; Western universities welcome genocide denial theo-

ries ; the so-called mainstream media starts denying the genocide again, which happened for example when BBC broadcasted a despicable documentary.

Boubacar Boris Diop : This documentary by BBC, *Rwanda, the Untold Story*, made the year 2014 a landmark date. Like it or not, this channel has the reputation of being objective, which is an image that it has always tried to preserve. Yet, it had no problem insulting more than a million dead Africans. But it does not matter in the end that BBC has shown, through such a vile production, the extent that certain media reputations can be overrated. The only thing to be remembered, alas, from the broadcast of this senseless film is the liberation of the 'denier' word, the fact that it is increasingly inviting itself into families. You remember, by the way, that we both joined the protest started by Linda Melvern to bring BBC officials to their senses, without success, of course, because these people have nothing to fear from a small African country. Six years later, the texts and events show us that this media episode was far from being insignificant. In fact, it announced what we are witnessing now, that genocide denial has become almost politically correct in the minds of some.

Jean-Pierre Karegeye : Yes, *Rwanda, the Untold Story*, is the synthesis of genocide denial, and it

is not the first time BBC has done this. What shocked Rwandans the most was this documentary's excessive contempt. President Kagame, who generally opposes contemptuous silence towards deniers, reacted with words that come back in several of his speeches with a few variations : "With each challenge put in our path, we become stronger, not weaker. Our body may become weak, but our spirit will never be weak." It is also a way of saying that those who ended the genocide will not be so easily discouraged. Coming back to this film though, what Jane Corbin did was disgusting. She has desecrated the memory of the genocide, which the United Nations considers to be an important means of genocide prevention. Just one example! "Murambi" is the title of your novel because, I imagine, it is impossible for you to feel indifferent about the history of this school. Jane Corbin visited the same site for her documentary. She was accompanied by a genocide survivor who knew nothing about the journalist's denial plan. The survivor began to give evidence of the genocide by showing the remains of children and women killed after being raped. As a remark, Corbin began to complain about the grim and strange presence of the victims' bodies. Was she expressing her compassion and the need to see the remains of the bodies buried and treated with dignity?

The survivor did not hear it that way. He explained that there were people who still doubted the reality of the genocide and needed to see what had happened in 1994. Corbin's "moral" comment to the survivor and in such a place was a beginning to the denial of the genocide. Indeed, she used the remains of Murambi's victims, among others, to express doubts about number of victims.

Boubacar Boris Diop : You spoke a moment ago about the intellectuals who throw themselves body and soul into falsifying the history of the Tutsi genocide. I can mention Reytjens in Belgium, Erlinder in the USA and a certain Philpot in Canada. The list is unfortunately not exhaustive. I see in their attitudes a clear refusal to learn the lessons of history, which is quite the opposite of Brecht who made the choice to warn humanity after the Nazi defeat and to declare, in a sentence that has become famous, that one should not "cry victory out of season" before adding, to be more precise : "for the belly is still fertile from which the foul beast sprang." The "foul beast" designates, of course, all Nazism, all the logics of extermination. Personally, I think that this hatred that is never disarmed is an enigma. A Rwandan friend V. told me that a few months after the genocide, when Kigali was still a distraught and wounded city, she came across a gentleman in the street, an old acquaint-

tance, who whispered to her in an icy tone laden with contempt : “What did you expect, then ? That we were going to hesitate to go all the way like the other times ?” Through this incident, we see how the defeated feel powerless and how their resentment is multiplied tenfold by the defeat, but also by their obsession with the final solution, the fear of not having dared to “go all the way.”

Jean-Pierre Karegeye : That is exactly right. All of these people blamed themselves for not having been able to kill all the Tutsi in Rwanda starting from the first 1959 massacres. For 35 years, up until 1994, they lived with the feeling of unfinished business. Thinking about the final solution, does it not suggest that the crime is already banal, and therefore invisible ? Brecht, who you just quoted, had already written this in 1935 : “When crimes begin to pile up, they become invisible. When sufferings become unendurable, the cries are no longer heard.” History seems to repeat itself over and over again.

What your Rwandan friend told you is absolutely spine-chilling. You can only imagine what my country would be like if the genocidaires were in power today. Or rather, we do not even dare to imagine it !

Boubacar Boris Diop : What do you think about the particular phenomenon of Western deniers that I just mentioned ?

Jean-Pierre Karegeye : You mentioned a few but there were many others afterwards, like Judi Re-ver. Why this relentlessness against Rwanda ? For now, I will only point out that the literature that these Western academics and journalists have on the genocide is based on ordinary racism, which is part of what Professor Alexandre Kimenyi calls “the trivialization of genocide” or what Brecht calls “invisible crimes.” Why Rwanda ? Well, it is simple : because Rwanda is in Africa. That is not all, of course, but it is unfortunately one of the main factors.

Boubacar Boris Diop : They also see themselves, I believe, as valiant knights, almost as martyrs of freedom of speech. If the subject were not so serious, we would laugh at these claims. But there is a red line that their love of freedom of expression will never make them cross. I mean, real courage would be to take the Holocaust at face value, and they will never risk that. In the world as it is, the slightest sentence that would downplay the Jewish Holocaust, and I am not even talking about denying it, would be problematic. And they know this only too well. Spitting on the bodies of a million Tutsi because there is no risk in doing so - that is called cowardice.

Jean-Pierre Karegeye : On this particular point, Aimé Césaire was very clear. He observed in Discourse



on Colonialism that what Europeans do not forgive Hitler for is not the extermination of the Jews in itself. "It is not," Césaire wrote, "crime in itself, the crime against man, is not the humiliation of man as such, it is the crime against the white man, the humiliation of the white man, and the fact that he applied to Europe colonialist procedures which until then had been reserved exclusively for the Arabs of Algeria, the coolies of India and the blacks of Africa." He could have added that organizing this crime within the West itself is a little more damaging to the image that the West wants to present of itself.

Of the Holocaust, I think various Holocaust Education and Genocide Prevention programs abroad help to contain denial narratives and anti-Semitism.

In the case of Rwanda, your general observation on Africa applies to the reception of the genocide against the Tutsi : "Being black and African remains an aggravating circumstance." One should not be surprised, therefore, by the extreme indifference and contempt of European deniers when it comes to something that is not a part of their own space. The freedom they have to write absurdities that seem knowledgeable regarding Africa is also part of the famous "white man's privilege" that is much talked about these days. This almost exclusively formed the base of

the speech they had when they "discovered" and "invented" Africa according to their fantasies and bias. This is why the Europeans have more respect for the victims of Srebrenica or for those of the two great wars than for the dead of Rwanda. François Mitterrand knew he was not risking any credibility when he supported the Habyarimana fascist regime and went so far as to declare : "In these countries, a genocide is not important," when talking about Rwanda in particular and Africa in general.

Boubacar Boris Diop : This extraordinary sentence by Mitterrand, reported by journalist Patrick de Saint-Exupéry, has never been denied. For me, it is the French equivalent of Donald Trump's "shithole countries," and when you think about it, it is much more serious. Coming back to Césaire, this sentence from *Discourse on Colonialism* earned him attacks of extreme virulence and accusations of anti-Semitism, but, sadly, his book remains as topical as it was in 1954. . . . When the "Law on the Positive Aspects of Colonization" was passed in France, Césaire himself publicly invited the deputies of the Palais-Bourbon to reread *Discourse on Colonialism*. Interesting, isn't it ?

Jean-Pierre Karegeye : Regarding these accusations against Césaire, a clarification is needed. The Martinican poet never left room in his thinking for the slightest ambiguity

about the Holocaust. He spoke of colonial practices. He also had a universal understanding of the condition of the Negro. In *Notebook of a Return to my Native Land*, while asserting himself as a profound Negro, he identifies with all the victims all over the world : "I would be a Jew-man, a Kaffir-man, a Hindu-man-from-Calcutta, a Harlem-man-who-doesn't-vote." In another stanza, he wants to be "a pogrom-man." I think we have to reread Césaire bearing in mind that his starting point as well as his guiding principle are based on the condition of black people, racism against blacks. His condition of "fundamental negro" opens him to the misfortunes of others. In 1998, he declared : "The negro is also the Jew, the foreigner, the Native American, the illiterate, the untouchable ...". He thus understands the Jewish question well. Rather, he shows that Europe has never repented its crimes and that the Holocaust is a culmination of the thousand-year history of the West. By the way, Frantz Fanon reminds us Césaire, in his *Black Skin, White Masks*, when he declares : "Anti-Semitism touches me in the flesh". He also speaks of the Jew as "a brother of misfortune."

That said, I am tempted to add that the West often evokes the Holocaust as if the crime had taken place elsewhere. Do you know, for example, that the Christian West has long ac-

cused the Jews of being a deicidal people? Long before the Holocaust, that is to say from the seventh century until 1959, the Catholic Church would pray every Good Friday for "the perfidious/infidels Jews."

Boubacar Boris Diop : Would you say today that reading Césaire has given you a better understanding of the mechanics of genocide?

Jean-Pierre Karegeye : Here is what I would say. Césaire is important for analyzing the colonial genocide and for establishing the link between the genocide against the Tutsi and the Negro condition. Césaire also allowed me to understand the "pseudo-humanism" of the West and to realize that it has learned nothing from the genocides that are rooted, among other things, in the dogma of a pure race. It is also in Césaire's work that we find some instances of dialogue between the Holocaust and the Tutsi genocide. Apart from Césaire, the Holocaust literature and the history of anti-Semitism are, in my opinion, essential for understanding the mechanisms of genocide.

There is another point that I would like to insist on, and it concerns researchers like Filip Reyntjens, who are part of the old school of thought and do nothing but recycle the "colonial library," to quote Mudimbe here. As surprising as it may seem to a rational mind, the Tutsi extermination project was based on the ethno-

logical narratives of the last centuries that have established the Hutu, Tutsi and Twa as inert objects of scientific research. This isn't obviously all of it, since some were at their best with the Habyarimana regime. Once again, one must mention the Reyntjens, who co-wrote the Rwandan Constitution, which was as vile as the one written by the supporters of apartheid in South Africa. Defeating such a regime also means deconstructing the condescending colonial thinking that gave genocide ideological support. Old school intellectuals like Reyntjens do not accept that the wheel of history has turned against them. This new Rwanda in which they have lost all their privileges is simply unacceptable for them. Many journalists and researchers exist only through their ludicrous "invention" of Africa. Judi Rever, Robin Philpot and a few others know perfectly well that without their denial of the genocide, they would not exist. If the word "Rwanda" were to be removed from their writings, nothing would be left of them. They invent themselves by inventing Africa. Who still talks about Pierre Péan and Stephen Smith?

Boubacar Boris Diop : Nobody, of course. There is already nothing more to say about these people. Let us now turn our attention to the study of the Tutsi genocide in Rwanda by African intellectuals. Shouldn't we talk,

in their case, about silence – an awkward silence – rather than active genocide denial? By this I mean that if we leave the countries directly concerned by the tragedy aside, Rwanda, DRC and Burundi, almost no African intellectual has anything to say about the subject. "Rwanda, writing as Duty to Memory," that you mentioned, is an exception, which should be put into perspective in many respects. In truth, even today, almost thirty years later, when I speak of the genocide of the Tutsi in African universities, the younger ones have absolutely no idea what it is all about and their professors only vaguely remember some television footage of the 1994 massacres, nothing more. How can such an indifference be explained? I often refer, out of desperation, to what Mongo Beti calls "the habit of unhappiness." It makes sense, but it is not enough. I believe that the shortcuts of Afro-pessimism are for many in the image that Africa reflects to the world. Whatever happens on the continent is blamed on Africans' congenital flaws and almost never on specific social and political mechanisms. The Tutsi genocide is thus read as a story of black people killing each other "once again," for no other reason than an atavistic taste for blood. This means : nothing new under the sun.

Jean-Pierre Karegeye : Your observation of African intellectuals is

important, because we have our share of responsibility, if only because of our silence during and after the genocide. . . I am not one of those who thinks that “saviors of the savages” are the sole cause of all our problems. You also just repeated what you wrote in *Africa Beyond the Mirror*, namely – and I quote from memory – that “among the rare cries of indignation heard during the genocide, hardly any came from Africa.” According to Eboussi Boulaga, this silence from African people is due to the fact that we are not used to valuing our own lives. The thing is, many African people have a disembodied reading of events that happen on the continent. What do African intellectuals pay attention to the most? A speech by Macron on Francophonie or on Africa or a tweet by Trump on electoral fraud in the United States. These challenge them much more than topics like genocide denial, the religious extremism that is striking several African countries, the Anglophone question in Cameroon, the current war in Ethiopia...And I am only mentioning the conflict zones.

Boubacar Boris Diop : In Rwanda specifically, how is the reconciliation process going?

Jean-Pierre Karegeye : After its political and military victory, the RPF never gave in to the slightest idea of revenge. The fight against genocide denial and genocidal ideolo-

gies is one of the pillars Rwandan reconstruction. One thing, for instance, that is not talked about much is the abolition of the death penalty in Rwanda in July 2007. Everywhere in the world, such a step should be hailed as a victory for humanity; in the Land of a Thousand Hills, after a genocide, it is simply exceptional. The profoundly humanistic and reconciling message is the following : extremists justified the extermination of more than one million Tutsi by the death of a single individual, President Habyarimana. The 2007 law, on the other hand, simply means that even the extermination of one million innocent people does not allow the killing of a single genocidaire.

I am proud to see the Rwandan people defying fate like they are and echoing President Kagame’s fundamental choices, including the three principles he listed at the 20th Genocide Memorial : “to stay together, to be accountable to ourselves, and to think big.”

We can live together and forgive without erasing the past because, as George Santayana so rightly says, “those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it and make the same mistakes.” Commemorating the genocide is also a way to prevent it from happening again. I like the Sankofa image that comes from West Africa, I believe from the Akan culture. This mythi-

cal bird that walks or flies with an egg in its beak and keeps its head stubbornly turned towards where it comes from. It is a sublime symbol of the dialectical relationship between the past and future.

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