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Nation, narration, unification? The politics of history teaching after the Rwandan genocide

SUSANNE BUCKLEY-ZISTEL

The paper investigates the strategy of the Rwandan government in pursuing its stated objective of national unity and reconciliation after the 1994 genocide. In order to unmake the divisions of the past it promotes a notion of collective identity, which is no longer based on ethnic but on civic identity of all as citizens. The strategy is centred on an interpretation of Rwanda's history according to which ethnicity did not exist prior to the arrival of the colonialists. But does narrating the nation as founded on ethnic harmony lead to unity in Rwanda? I argue that due to the top-down nature of the government's history discourse, its censorship of alternative accounts as well as the deep scars of the genocide division and resentment persists. At present, ethnic belonging is still very important for most Rwandans restricting their willingness to consider different interpretations of the past. The paper draws on the teaching of history as an example of illustrating means by which the Rwandan government narrates its past. It analyses the debates about and practises of history teaching in schools as well as in education camps called *ingandos* through which released genocide prisoners, but also a considerably large portion of the society in general, have to pass. By way of conclusion it argues that the Rwandan government introduces narrative closure on alternative interpretations of the past which stands in the way of reconciliation and a genuinely grown national unity in the future.

Introduction

History narratives have been used at many stages in Rwanda's past to polarize and politicize social relations. Most tragically, they have been employed to incite hatred, culminating in the 1994 genocide. Consequently, history remains a highly contested subject at present, in particular because it defines the role and significance of ethnicity and the relations between Hutu and Tutsi which lie at the core of past violence and future peace.¹

History is written by winners, Walter Benjamin famously remarked.² After a violent conflict, the new power holders shape what is remembered and what is forgotten with their choice of narratives about the past being informed by their objectives for the future. The past is narrated in a way that secures the new government's position, absolves it from all responsibility for past crimes and aims to create a society which can be governed according to its intentions. In

this context, political but also civil institutions, such as schools, museums and the media, play a significant role in shaping identities since they organize and control discourses in the public realm. In order to understand how this is the case in Rwanda this article first introduces the notion of “unification policies.” It then considers which particular narratives about the past are selected; how they are disseminated by public institutions; and, lastly, asks what political function these narratives have with regard to establishing unity and reconciliation in the divided society. Importantly, given the contentious nature of Rwandan history discourses, this article refrains from providing its own account of Rwanda’s past but instead describes the various ways in which this official history is disseminated and endorsed.

Unification policies after violent conflicts

Following violent conflicts, a key objective of a new government is to narrate a history that will unify the war-torn society. This narrative forms a key part of what can be called “unification policies”: top-down efforts to influence the relationship between parties to a conflict in order to create a collective identity. This, for instance, can be done by creating a national identity—in particular via the notion of an all-inclusive political identity, i.e. citizenship—which can serve as a vehicle for overcoming the divisions that were central to the conflict. Here, nation-building turns into a project of national reconciliation and it is predominantly achieved by re-shaping the identity of the parties to the conflict through narratives about a common past and future. As Pierre Nora observed, collective identities are produced through memory discourses since remembrance has a coercive force which creates a sense of belonging.³ His view is complemented by Ernest Renan who reminds us that collective identities are also produced by forgetting.⁴ “Whole societies may choose to forget uncomfortable knowledge” and transform it into “open secrets,” known by all, but knowingly not known.⁵ Against this backdrop, Stanley Cohen introduces the term “social amnesia,” which refers to a mode of forgetting by which a society separates itself from a discreditable past record.⁶ It might happen at an organized, official and conscious level, the deliberate cover-up, the rewriting of history, or through the type of cultural slippage that occurs when information disappears.⁷ This article is concerned with the former.⁸

Against this backdrop, with reference to the nation, current writing about the politics of narrating history and memory has been strongly influenced by the work of Eric Hobsbawm and Benedict Anderson. Hobsbawm is predominantly concerned with how authorities invent traditions—and their seeming continuity with the past—in order to maintain authority, forge social cohesion and create a common culture.⁹ Hobsbawm’s approach resonates with Anderson’s view of a nation as collectivity defined by its own manner of imagining itself.¹⁰ The significance of both lies in their illustration of how agency, here political power, influences the choice of narratives about what is remembered and what is forgotten, and how this constitutes collective identities in the present. In this sense,

“[m]emory is a struggle over power and who gets to decide the future.”¹¹ History-telling and remembrance remains a profoundly political endeavour since it is central to present day conflicts over forms of the state; social relations; and subjectivity.¹² The political aspect is rooted in practices which bind rituals of national identification in order to fabricate a collective identity.¹³ This takes place, *inter alia*, at the level of (re)writing and teaching history.

The history narratives of the Government of Rwanda

If our identity is always rooted in the past, the question is not whether one should remember, but how.¹⁴ The current government of Rwanda has taken this observation to heart and engages in a deliberate effort of narrating the country's history in a manner that, so it argues, will result in nation-building and unity. As explained by a senior officer of the National Unity and Reconciliation Commission responsible for Public Relations:

Something disintegrated us. How can we create the values that unite us? Disintegration came from bad governance. Can good governance lead to unity? ... The System is your enemy, not your neighbour. So, let's look at the system and shape our nation.¹⁵

Importantly, in its public rhetoric, rather than acknowledging that the history of Rwanda is constituted in the process of narrating it, the government argues that a true version of the past can be recovered. For example, as one senior government official stated: “Reconciliation in Rwanda requires listening to the country's history.”¹⁶ This implies that the government acts as if that history is already out there and we only have to take note of it.

Since the social conflict in Rwanda is based on the categories of Hutu and Tutsi, the central objective of this “unification policy” is to overcome the dichotomous relationship and create one nation. According to the government's own account, this is motivated by two concerns:

Firstly, because this problem [the Hutu/Tutsi antagonism] has engendered divisions among and destroyed the unity of Rwandans. Secondly, to always have this issue as a top priority is detrimental to the country and its citizens: Ethnic *mututsi* keeps considering himself as a Tutsi, and sees a *muhutu* as an enemy; and the ethnic *muhutu* sees himself as a Hutu first and perceives a Tutsi as an enemy, while the *mutwa* always sees himself as the dregs of society. Thus, these different ethnic components cannot have a common ideal which would help them to move forward together, and could not detect a common enemy from abroad aiming to divide them and fellow Rwandan who could harm them in a bid to satisfy his own needs, by building an “akazu” [kin-centred management system] in public administration, in the economy or the educational system.¹⁷

The above quote implies that the objective behind the government's unification policy is to reduce, if not to remove, the tensions between the two groups. Importantly, the statement reveals three strategies which shall be discussed in this article: first, the establishment of a *common ideal*; second the creation of an *outside enemy* and; third, the creation of an *internal enemy*. Before considering

these key themes, the government's version of the past shall be recounted. The objective here is not to evaluate and criticize this narrative, but to draw out its different strands.

Pre-colonial harmony and unity

According to the Rwandan government's history discourse, prior to the arrival of German (1890–1916) and then Belgian (1918–62) colonialists the relationship between Hutu, Tutsi and Twa was characterized by harmony. The government, therefore, explicitly rejects all essentialist approaches which argue for a more primordial meaning of the categories Hutu, Tutsi and Twa. Rather, the government argues, in pre-colonial Rwanda the labels referred to wealth and social statuses; that they were not static; and that social mobility was possible by marriage and changes in economic circumstances.

People who were called Tutsi are those who were mainly living on cow breeding; a Tutsi who had no more cows, and who was then living on agriculture, was counted among Hutus. People who were called Hutu are those who were mainly living on agriculture, a Hutu who had many cows and who was mainly living on cow breeding, was counted among Tutsis. Twas were mainly living on pottery and hunting animals in the forest. Twas were kept away by other Rwandans. Some Twa were made Tutsi such as Busyete and others.¹⁸

This resonates in the following quote:

What is quite certain is that being a Hutu or a Tutsi is to belong to a different wealth group, which also determines the kind of relationship existing between the two ethnic groups and is also reflected at the administrative level. A well-off Hutu who would take a Tutsi girl as a wife was said to have cast off his being Hutu "Kwihutura." An ethnic Tutsi who would grow poor (there were many reasons for that: cows in bad shape, the fact of being dispossessed of one's cows) would become a hutu [sic].¹⁹

In short, before the arrival of the colonisers, "[a]ll Rwandans were living together and speaking the same language, they had the same culture and were loving each other."²⁰ Ethnicities did not exist, conflicts did not occur, and all people considered themselves to be Rwandan or "the 'King's People,' the King being the stump, which brought them together."²¹ Similarly, the 2003 catalogue of the National Museum of Rwanda in Butare states that,

[i]t is quite common to refer to the Hutu, the Tutsi and the Twas as ethnic groups. This terminology is incorrect, since normally it refers to different groups within a population who can be distinguished by location, language, culture and history. Yet the Hutu, the Tutsi and the Twa live in the same country, on the same hills, practise the same traditions and speak the same language, Kinyarwanda. . . . [D]ue to matrimonial unions, blood bond and pacts . . . there was always an element of togetherness that existed between them which created a strong will and consciousness to build one nation.²²

Consequently, there is no reference to Hutu or Tutsi in the museum.²³ For the government, the only inequality in Rwanda before the arrival of the first colonisers was between royal courts and peasants:

Pre-colonial Rwanda was a highly centralized Kingdom presided over by Tutsi kings who hailed from one ruling clan. The king ruled through three categories of chiefs: cattle chiefs; land chiefs; and military chiefs. The chiefs were predominantly, but not exclusively, Batutsi, especially the cattle and military chiefs. While the relationship between the king and the rest of the population was unequal, the relationship between the ordinary Bahutu, Batutsi and Batwa was one of mutual benefit mainly through the exchange of their labour. The relationship was symbiotic. A clientele system called “Ubugake” permeated the whole society.²⁴

Significantly, as evident in the above quote, for the government the inequality between the royal court on one hand and ordinary Rwandans on the other affected Hutu and Tutsi alike. Both sides were victims of despotic rule and thus equal in subjugation. This aspect of alleged pre-colonial peace and unity is the cornerstone of the government’s history narrative. It serves as a reference point for today’s unification policy and signifies a state to which the government wants to return, as we shall see below.

Colonialism and the “Social Revolution”

The government maintains that the unity of Rwandans was destroyed by first German and then Belgian colonialism, and that the colonisers “started sowing the bad seed of sectarianism . . . which gnawed little by little the unity of Rwandans until it was destroyed.”²⁵ Given this alleged impact, it is necessary to describe the conduct of the colonisers in greater detail. Based on racial scholarship popular in Europe at the time, colonial anthropologists “discovered” three different groups of Rwandans which supposedly represented African population groups: the Ethiopid (Tutsi), Bantu (Hutu) and Pygmoid (Twa).²⁶ Moreover, they introduced the now-discredited “Hamitic hypothesis,” which argues that Tutsi originated from northern Africa while Hutu belong to the Bantu people and constitute, together with the Batwa, the indigenous population of Rwanda.²⁷ This account of origin implies that while Hutu and Twa are indigenous to Rwanda, Tutsi are merely immigrants. As we shall see later, rendering Tutsi immigrants had serious repercussions during the 1994 genocide. Following the widely practised strategy of indirect rule—which enabled colonial powers to govern their colonised territories more effectively—Tutsi were chosen as the superior race while Hutu and Twa were subordinated to the rule of Tutsi monarchs. The supremacy of Tutsi was explained through referring to their racial features (expressed in their stature and nobility) and their apparent physical resemblance to Europeans, as well as their alleged economic (richness through cattle herding) and political skills (“men borne to command, like Romans”).²⁸

According to the government—but also more widely accepted—the combination of history writing, ethnic categorizing and divide-and-rule strategy of the European colonisers had a pervasive impact. At the time, Rwandan scholars, such as Alexis Kagame, embraced the accounts, turning them into general wisdom and imbuing them with political significance.²⁹ The Tutsi elite adopted its ascribed nobility and collaborated with European historians to invent a past

that legitimated its superiority.³⁰ As a consequence, Hutu were classified second-class citizens with only limited access to the new colonial social and economic resources, primary education and an almost complete exclusion from higher administrative positions.³¹ Because of the discriminatory provision of resources, the imposition of exclusive structures and the assertion of pressure through the colonial state-building process, collective identity became increasingly meaningful, further limiting the initial degree of flexibility between individual Hutu, Tutsi and Twa and turning them into homogeneous categories.³²

Today it is beyond doubt that colonialism in Rwanda had a detrimental impact on the social, political and economic composition of the country. Not only did it consolidate a superior position for Tutsi it also increasingly portrayed them as foreign migrants who occupy the country and oppress its original inhabitants. Many Hutu and Twa considered themselves to be the indigenous population while the presence of Tutsi was described as the “Hamite infiltration of the Bantu country,”³³ leading to the first disputes over the Tutsi’s rights to citizenship.³⁴ Importantly, moreover, it led to a growing feeling of inferiority and resentment among Hutu against both colonial and Tutsi supremacy. In the words of the current government, “some Batutsi actually considered themselves as superior when it comes to knowledge, administration and warfare strategies, while some ethnic Hutu saw themselves as inferior.”³⁵ According to the government account, towards the end of the colonial era (1950s) this alienation was aggravated by the colonial administration and Belgian missionaries, called the White Fathers,³⁶ as stated in the following:

When the colonial powers saw that African elites were demanding independence, they changed their policies in the colonies. To this end, the Belgians dropped their old allies, the Tutsis, in Rwanda and turned towards the Hutus. They made them (the Hutus) understand that the time had come for them to take the upper hand and take revenge against the Tutsi oppressors.³⁷

Significantly, this shift in alliances had a crucial impact on the power balance of the country:

The colonists used a well-known method: Divide and conquer. They used the rare Hutus who attended the seminaries (they had no other choice) to oust the Tutsis from power. That was the way that events of 1959 started, leading to a change in power in 1961 and independence on July 1, 1962. These events were more or less guided by the colonial power.³⁸

Although we shall consider the “events of 1959” below, it is important to note, in the government’s account, the absence of responsibility of Rwandans, both Hutu and Tutsi, and the exclusive responsibility of external powers, i.e. colonisers and missionaries, who used the Rwandans for their own ends.³⁹ The current government, therefore, argues that: “[t]he colonizers instituted ethnic groups and categorised Rwandans accordingly” so that “a simple analysis of Rwandan history shows that the colonizers were at the origin of ethnic dissension.”⁴⁰ Central, therefore, to the government’s “unification policy” is the transference of responsibility to outside parties which absolves all Hutu and Tutsi from responsibility. As a

consequence, the narrative has a cohesive function since it binds Hutu and Tutsi together under the guise of victimhood: both were equally victims of colonial practise. It hence serves the purpose of uniting the nation.

To return to the above quotation, the “events of 1959” refer to the so-called “Social Revolution” (November 1959). Political parties emerged in 1959, including the *Union Nationale Rwandaise* (UNAR) an elite Tutsi party demanding independence and the *Parti du Mouvement de l’Emancipation Hutu* (Parmehutu) founded by Grégoire Kayibanda a signatory of the “Bahutu Manifesto” (March 24, 1957). According to the Manifesto, even if “white–black colonialism” ended, the “worse colonialism of hamite over the Muhutu” would remain.⁴¹ On November 1, a Parmehutu leader (Dominique Mbonyumutwa) was assaulted by UNAR activists. As a result, Tutsi were attacked, leading to c.1,000 being killed and c.10,000 fleeing abroad. By November 14, order had been restored in favour of Parmehutu until in January 1961 the “Coup of Gitarama”⁴² finally abolished the monarchy and installed the Hutu party MDR-Parmehutu⁴³ in government, a party whose programme “was indistinguishable from that set forth in the [Bahutu] Manifesto.”⁴⁴

Post-independence history narratives and the genocide

When Rwanda gained independence in 1962, ethnic differences continued to be manipulated for political ends. Based on the history narrative introduced by colonialism, the Hutu president Grégoire Kayibanda (1962–73) argued that Tutsi were foreign immigrants and his objective was “to return the country to its owners,”⁴⁵ the Hutu. Kayibanda’s formulation of Rwandan unity and national identity excluded all Tutsi, with the MDR-Parmehutu songs, statistics and political discourse portraying Hutu as autochthon and Tutsi as foreigners.⁴⁶ After a *coup d’état* in 1972, Kayibanda’s explicitly anti-Tutsi politics were replaced by the Hutu President Juvénal Habyarimana’s (1972–94) quota regulations based on ethnic census.⁴⁷ Even though this severely restricted the access of Tutsi to public offices, they were able to find employment in the private sector so that their situation improved slightly,⁴⁸ while on a more general level, interethnic tensions diminished, leading, *inter alia*, to an increase of intermarriages between Hutu and Tutsi.

Despite these relative improvements, in the narrative of the present Rwandan government the Habyarimana regime is described as follows:

When the second republic came into being in 1973, headed by President Habyarimana, the slogan was “peace and unity”. These fine words were only a slogan and were never followed by concrete actions. Indeed, policies based on regional and ethnic differences could not bring the Rwandan people neither peace nor unity.⁴⁹

This critical view of the Habyarimana regime by the present government must be understood against the context of how it came to power. In October 1990, a group of Rwandans, referred to as Rwandan Patriotic Front/Army (RPF/A) and comprised predominantly of decedents of Tutsi who had fled into exile following the 1959 “Social Revolution,” invaded Rwanda from Uganda and started an

insurgency war. Frustrated with the conditions of living in the diaspora, they had tried unsuccessfully to return to their country of origin and eventually opted for returning by violent means, i.e. for overthrowing Habyarimana's government and its political institutions. Today, the RPF plays an essential role in the country's government. Most prominently, its key leader Paul Kagame was first Vice-President and Minister of Defence (1994–2000) and has since been the President. In order to render its 1990 insurgency legitimate, the government thus needs to paint a negative picture of Habyarimana's regime. For example,

In the early 1980s, the refugee problem was at the forefront and President Habyarimana did not accept negotiations. He said that Rwanda was crammed full and refugees should be accepted as citizens of the countries in which they were now living. To better communicate his ideas, he used the image of a glass filled with water, where one more drop would make it overflow. This was said clearly so that the refugees should feel excluded forever. Negotiations were impossible because Habyarimana chose war. War broke out on January 10, 1990 and lasted 4 years.⁵⁰

This is particularly important considering that one consequence of the 1990 insurgency was that Hutu resentment turned again against Tutsi. To secure their political position, leaders evoked the colonial and subsequent MDR-Parmehutu narratives about the "Hamit infiltration of the Bantu country" and appealed to the Hutu to "defend their nation,"⁵¹ once more increasing ethnic divisions and hatred in the country. Tutsi were again portrayed as minorities, foreigners, authors of injustice and enemies of the Republic, while Hutu identity was defined as indigenous majority and former victims of injustice who emancipated themselves against the Tutsi monarchy in 1959.⁵² In the rhetoric of propaganda machines such as the *Kangura* newspaper, Hutu were called upon to "[r]ediscover your ethnicity. . . . You are an important ethnicity of the Bantu group. The nation is artificial, but the ethnic group is natural."⁵³ In other words, they were called upon to exterminate all Tutsi in a genocide.

Today, the RPF is often accused of being responsible for the genocide since it was triggered by its 1990 invasion. In the words of René Lemarchand:

The key point here is that there would have been no genocide had Kagame not decided to unleash his refugee warriors on 1 October 1990, in violation of the most elementary principle of international law. If he deserves full credit for stopping the killings, an equally convincing case can be made for the view that he bears much of the onus of responsibility for provoking them.⁵⁴

Against this backdrop, the government's history narratives considered above serve the function of legitimating the insurgency in hindsight and shifting all responsibility to the Habyarimana regime.

Dividing and uniting through history discourses

History narratives played a significant role in 1990–94. In the run-up to the genocide, historians such as Ferdinand Nahimana, professor of history at the National

University of Rwanda and director of the radio station *Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines* (RTLM), one of the key vehicles of hate speech before and during the genocide, successfully exploited the narratives of Tutsi belonging to a different ethnic group. For instance, on June 4, 1994 RTLM stated:

They should all stand up so that we kill the Inkotanyi [cockroaches] and exterminate them . . . the reason we will exterminate them is that they belong to one ethnic group. Look at the person's height and his physical appearance. Just look at his small nose and then break it.⁵⁵

The role of historians in the incitement of the genocide has been central in efforts to come to terms with Rwanda's violent past, turning the manipulation of history into a serious criminal offence. This is evident in Nahimana's prosecution at the International Crime Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) where the Trial Chamber concluded that

RTLM broadcasts exploited the history of Tutsi privilege and Hutu disadvantage, and the fear of armed insurrection, to mobilize the population, whipping them into a frenzy of hatred and violence that was directed largely against the Tutsi ethnic group. The Interahamwe and other militia listened to RTLM and acted on the information that was broadcast by RTLM. RTLM actively encouraged them to kill, relentlessly sending the message that the Tutsi were the enemy and had to be eliminated once and for all.⁵⁶

Nahimana was found guilty in 2003 on the counts of conspiracy to commit genocide; genocide; direct and public incitement to commit genocide; crimes against humanity (persecution); and crimes against humanity (extermination).⁵⁷ Sentencing Nahimana, the presiding judge explicitly drew out the link between his responsibility as an intellectual and the deliberate abuse of his skills as a historian:

You were fully aware of the power of words, and you used the radio—the medium of communication with the widest public reach—to disseminate hatred and violence. You may have been motivated by your sense of patriotism and the need you perceived for equity for the Hutu population in Rwanda. But instead of following legitimate avenues of recourse, you chose a path of genocide. In doing so, you betrayed the trust placed in you as an intellectual and a leader. Without a firearm, machete or any physical weapon, you caused the deaths of thousands of innocent civilians.⁵⁸

The current government of Rwanda, however, displays an equally acute awareness of power of historical narratives. This is expressed in President Kagame's speech during the commemorations of the tenth anniversary of the genocide in 2004:

Our history over the past century is a complex product of the interaction between Rwanda's culture and external influences. In many ways, the genocide in Rwanda stems from the colonial period, when the colonialists and those who called themselves evangelists [the catholic missionaries] sowed the seeds of hate and division. This is evident from the 1959 massacres and subsequent ones, which had become the order of the day in Rwanda and in which the international community had become habitual bystanders. These massacres culminated in the 1994 genocide.⁵⁹

The concern about Rwanda's history and its impact manifests itself *inter alia* during conferences and public debates which often lead to a call for a more

scientific analysis of the past and the establishment of “the truth.” This was for instance the most pressing issue identified during a consultation by the Kigali-based peace Institute of Research and Dialogue for Peace (IRDP) entitled *Dialogue, Consensus and Peace* in 2003 which involved key Rwandan politicians, civil society leaders and intellectuals.⁶⁰ “History,” one participant remarked, “is a social field, but it is also scientific. We have been divided because we are not scientific. We therefore need archaeology and not only oral sources. Oral sources can be transformed.” In the same vein another participant stated that “history is a fact, and there are some things you cannot change. We need to talk the truth.” Significantly, in the discussions during the conference history was strongly linked to the notion of identity and it was seen as the “source of the solution of Rwanda’s problems,” as one contributor put it. This resonates in the work of some contemporary Rwandan historians and intellectuals who are also concerned about the interpretations of the country’s history and the impact it has on social relations and who consider it to be their key responsibility to produce a “scientific” review of the past that will assist in the reconstruction of the country and its social fabric.⁶¹

And yet, despite these debates the government has already settled on its version of the past. For example, a 2004 publication of the National Unity and Reconciliation Commission (NURC) suggests that—since there was unity in Rwanda prior to the arrival of the colonialists—two conclusions can be drawn, namely that “[first] the Hutu and Tutsi entities which have been at the root of the conflict in the contemporary Rwandan society have constituted neither race, nor tribe, nor ethnic groups. Second, those conflicts [are] more politically-based than anthropologically-based.”⁶² This implies that if conflict in Rwanda is neither racial, tribal nor ethnic, but the result of political calculation and manipulation, this process can be reversed and un-made in order to promote unification. In essence, the view taken is that if antagonism has been constructed through history narratives it can also be deconstructed. History is thus seen as both source of the problem and its solution. As stated in a government document entitled “The Unity of Rwandans”:

There is a lot one can say about the origins and social relationship between Batutsi, Hutus and Twas. Let us just take the following idea: Banyarwanda must understand that maintaining themselves prisoners of their belonging to ethnic Hutu, Tutsi and Twa groups is one of the big obstacles standing in their way to development. . . . What matters is to live together peacefully, work together for the development of their country, so that Banyarwanda can tackle and solve their common problems.⁶³

In a similar vein, the Rwandan Minister for Good Governance stated in 2003:

The historical process the Rwandans have passed through has created sectarian conditioned *Munyarwanda* [“Rwandans”] with all the exclusion mentality that goes with it. Such conditioning can not form a basis for the synergetic relationship that is required for social advancement. Thinkers and writers, media, folklore and governance practices must be aligned to contribute to the process of emancipation. A new culture of national identity must be forged and nurtured.⁶⁴

In order to pursue this task, the government has launched a series of projects and mechanisms. History teaching, in particular, is given a prominent role in unifying the country, as stated in a UNESCO-sponsored report based on research coordinated by the Director of National Curriculum Development on education in Rwanda:

Education and specifically curriculum policy change in Rwanda is conceptualised as serving the essential national priorities of instilling into all Rwandans a sense of security; reinforcement of national cohesion and positive values of society; promotion of peace, unity and reconciliation; promoting education, capacity building and human resource development and giving Rwandans essential skills for poverty reduction. Relevance of curricula is seen in this context. Some of the successes registered so can be attributed to a high level of political will and leadership which has encouraged reformulation of aims and principles of education which focus on national identity through peace, unity and reconciliation. Political will is also expressed through formulation and development of policies, which aim at building structures and institutions strong enough to resist future conflict.⁶⁵

Against this backdrop, the following section considers how the government is spreading its history discourses in Rwanda today and with what effect.

Teaching history after the genocide

Given the awareness of the potency of interpretations of Rwanda's past, teaching history and developing a curriculum has been a serious challenge. Prior to the 1994 genocide, the curriculum was based on the colonisers' interpretation of the various origins of Hutu, Tutsi and Twa and perpetuated the argument of migration and ethnic differences.⁶⁶ According to the current government, this resulted in a form of segregation in schools, by, for example, assigning identification files to students which required them to reveal, and identify with, their ethnic identity. Moreover, the teaching of history and civics reinforced ethnic divisions since it stressed ethnicity, leading to conflicts inside and outside the classrooms.⁶⁷ It was based on the use of *mots-marqueurs*, i.e. code words, which were applied to perpetuate the stereotypes developed during colonialism and reinforced after independence under Kayibanda and Habyarimana,⁶⁸ and which made reference to Tutsi being foreigners and enemies of the Republic, and to Hutu being the majority and victims of Tutsi injustice.⁶⁹ As stated in the aforementioned UNESCO report:

[f]rom 1973–1994, the policy of ethnic regional, and sex imbalance in schools was another institutionalised form of social division in society. This was reinforced by a civic education programme that conveyed messages, inciting pupils to ethnic hatred and social divisions. The content involved teaching political party propaganda.⁷⁰

And it concludes:

In Rwanda, the political climate and the education system, particularly the curriculum, failed the nation in 1994. The approach emphasised human differences instead of similarities and individual responsibilities. There is widespread belief that the content and more especially the process reinforced social fissures, which directly or indirectly contributed to the genocide of 1994.⁷¹

After the genocide, the new government made it a priority to change the curriculum so that it no longer reflects the colonial discourse about ethnic identity. To this end, it held a series of consultations about strategies to approach Rwanda's history and the teaching of it.⁷² As early as April 1995, a conference entitled *La politique et la planification de l'éducation au Rwanda* took place in Kigali. One of the conference's recommendations was to place a moratorium on history teaching until guidelines as to how to teach history were available. Following this, a commission comprised of lecturers from the National University of Rwanda (NUR) and the Institute of Science and Technology Research began a "reflection process" to revise the history of Rwanda. The commission, however, was dissolved due to a lack of funding. In October 1998, a conference entitled *Valeurs partagées pour la promotion d'une culture de paix au Rwanda* was held in Kigali which recommended that the teaching of civic education should return to traditional Rwandan values and "to create a formal forum for the restitution of the scientific truth of Rwanda's history."⁷³ Moreover, in November 1998 a seminar took place at NUR in which the participants discussed the question: *Changements politiques survenus en 1959. Oui ou non, y avait-il une révolution?* (Political changes in 1959. Was it a revolution or not?), yet the participants were unable to reach an agreement. One year later, another seminar addressed the topic *Changements (politiques) au Rwanda de 1959 à 1962* ((Political) changes in Rwanda between 1959 and 1962) which was at least able to suggest a number of recommendations, including to create a national commission for revising Rwanda's history, which should operate under the auspices of the National Unity and Reconciliation Commission (NURC) and the history department of NUR; to compose a history of Rwanda which could serve as a reference for school textbooks; and to train history teachers.⁷⁴ Finally, in 2006, international scholars and curriculum development specialists from the Human Rights Center at the University of California and the organization *Facing History and Ourselves*, together with Rwandan academics (working on behalf of the Rwandan Ministry of Education, Science, Technology and Scientific Research (MINEDUC)) compiled a comprehensive reference book for secondary school teachers entitled *The Teaching of History of Rwanda. A Participatory Approach* designed to serve as a manual for history teaching.⁷⁵

On a more general note, research suggests that teachers in Rwandan fear the subject of history, which can be explained by the prevailing tension over how to address the question of ethnicity.⁷⁶ Some critical voices argue, however, that the existing moratorium on history teaching is a mistake since it deprives students of necessary training about cultural values, religious developments and economic practises.⁷⁷ Rather, the country's history *should* be taught, omitting contentious periods. In fact, despite the absence of a national history curriculum, history has been taught in various forms in individual schools. Research indicates that African and world history are taught in the same manner as pre-1994 with the omission of any reference to Rwandan history or, Rwandan history is taught as before, but with the omission of sensitive aspects.⁷⁸ In a more negative vein, a recent parliamentary investigation allegedly found incidents where the old style of teaching was still practised using history books, which, according to the authors of the

report, “incite hatred.”⁷⁹ The teachers responsible for these actions were taken to court and found guilty on accounts of inciting ethnic hatred, and the Parliament launched a special commission to conduct further investigations.

It is also important to note that, even though history has not been taught in a formal manner at most schools, parents, family members and community members informally communicate to their children an interpretation of the country’s past, its divisions and conflicts. That these versions can be biased is understandable given the diverse experiences of the genocide and the role the different groups play in contemporary society. In order to provide some guidance, the government, together with a number of non-governmental organizations, has initiated some additional projects such as the development of a provisional curriculum on human rights and manuals for a civics curriculum.⁸⁰

Moreover, even though teaching history at schools has been suspended since 1994, history is being taught in a formal manner to a large group of adult Rwandans via *ingandos* (“civic education camps”). Etymologically, the word *ingando* derives from the Kinyarwanda verb *kuganda* which signifies “stopping normal activities in order to find solutions to national challenges.”⁸¹ The government refers to *igandos* as traditional institutions in which all Rwandans participated without discrimination.⁸² According to the public rhetoric, in the past “whenever Rwanda faced disasters (wars, natural calamities, etc.), the *Mwami* (King) mobilised and prepared the population through *Ingandos*. They were communal retreats where people shared in decisions on war and peace and how Rwanda was governed.”⁸³ This romantic view of the past has however been challenged and *ingandos* have been criticized for being mere inventions of traditions and a past that did not occur in this way.⁸⁴ In this case, as argued by Hobsbawm, the invention of traditions serves the purpose of maintaining authority, forging cohesion and creating a common culture.

In their current form, *ingandos* were first introduced in 1996 in order to integrate Hutu ex-combatants and ex-insurgents—both from within the country as well as from refugee camps—and returning refugees more generally. Later, the scope of *ingandos* was expanded to include students from secondary schools and universities. From 2002 onwards, and in particular after a series of presidential pardons in 2003, *ingandos* became a compulsory stopover for released prisoners before returning to their home communities. Moreover, informal traders, community leaders, people with disabilities and genocide survivors are today targeted by *ingandos* and, as of 2006, so are all university lecturers and administrative staff. The significance of shaping their views on the country is expressed by the government-appointed rector of National University of Rwanda:

We need to do leadership training. There are professors who have been here in Rwanda. So we need to go for Ingando because we are trainers of future leaders. As managers of institutions, we need to know each other and understand government policies. When you sit down together, eat together and chat together, you get to know each other. I myself I will be available for the training.⁸⁵

In total, although official statistics are unavailable it appears that a significantly large portion of the society passes through these education camps. *Ingandos* run

from two weeks to four months and it is estimated that each year approximately 3,000 students undergo training.⁸⁶ While regular *ingandos* address up to 300 to 400 people, those for released genocidaires include up to 1,800 participants.⁸⁷ The outreach and potential impact of *ingandos* is, therefore, considerable in a society of approximately nine million, so that consequently, *ingandos* potentially have a “direct impact on the beliefs, attitudes and behaviour of the people who attend them, and they will influence the conditions for the return of the ex-prisoners to the hills and national reconciliation.”⁸⁸

The training in *ingandos* broadly covers five central themes: (1) analysis of Rwanda’s problems; (2) history of Rwanda; (3) political and socio-economic issues in Rwanda and Africa; (4) rights, obligations and duties; and (5) leadership. Again despite the supposed moratorium on formal history teaching, the subject has been taught to large groups of Rwandans in the context of *ingandos*. And yet, in the absence of a national history curriculum, what version of the past is being taught? The international NGO Penal Reform International (PRI)—which itself contributes modules to the *ingando* training and supports the government in other trainings and monitoring matters—has compiled a typology of history narratives taught in the education camps which serve as a unique insight into the otherwise “black box” of *ingando*. According to PRI, the teaching is based on the argument that unity existed prior to the arrival of colonial powers and that division between ethnic identities was a result of colonial practice as outlined above.⁸⁹ The government thus uses *ingando* as an opportunity to disseminate its particular version of the past and to influence a large number of participants according to its unification agenda. Critically, PRI concludes that

[t]he version relayed in the *ingando* errs with regard to a number of aspects, either because of its interpretation or because of its omissions. In fact, it is about the role of Rwandans in their own history that the courses in the *ingando* appear to be most questionable. Yet it is essential nowadays that the work of memory and reconciliation is subject to the recognition of three things: recognition of Rwandan responsibility in the genocide, which is often blamed on the role of the white colonizer; recognition of the individual responsibility of the genocide killers, which cannot be entirely diluted within that of a monstrous machination; [and] recognition of persistent ethnic divides in present day Rwanda.⁹⁰

Counter discourses and the consequences of narrative closure

The government’s history narratives are, however, not without contestation.⁹¹ Since the unification policy of the government is centred on the alleged unity of all Rwandans before colonialism it is important to stress the counter-discourses which question this cohesion.⁹² Regarding the origin of ethnic identity, narratives about Rwanda’s past can be differentiated according to whether they promote an essentialist or a social-constructivist view.⁹³ As Peter Uvin argues:

[w]hat could be called the official Hutu discourse (the one that was employed in the genocide and is widely accepted by Hutu radicals until now) is what Western scientists would call an essentialist one. The Hutu and the Tutsi are radically different people (in local parlance,

ances), with different origins, different histories, and—this is where prejudice comes in—different moral and ethical features. The counterdiscourse (which is the official one of the current Tutsi-dominated, postgenocidal government) is purely social-constructivist. It asserts that the distinctions between Hutu and Tutsi are the products of the colonial imagination and associated divide-and-rule policies.⁹⁴

Both history narratives have lately been called into question. In a 2004 study, Jan Vansina⁹⁵ dates the emergence of ethnic identities back to the second half of the seventeenth century. Tutsi identity, Vansina suggests, first emerged among political elites and then expanded to the military sector. This group increasingly exploited the peasant population which was, at the time and until the twentieth century, not referred to as “Hutu” but according to regional identity. As a consequence, “power, not migration or culture, was the dominant factor of differentiation.”⁹⁶

A further claim is that prior to the arrival of German and Belgian colonialists, Rwandan society was not marked by peace and unity, it was not “one nation” as the current government argues, nor was it non-violent. Rather, for the second half of the nineteenth century aristocratic exploitation intensified and became more and more cruel. In Vansina’s words,

[f]ar from constituting an apotheosis of a great united nation encompassing almost two million people, the kingdom of Rwabugiri and his successors offered the spectacle of nearly two million people standing on the verge of an abyss.⁹⁷

In particular, the introduction of a tax levied by chiefs on farmers and referred to as *uburetwa* had a detrimental impact on the relationship between herders and farmers since only the latter, Hutu, were subjected to exploitation. It is here where Vansina locates the precursors of the Rwandan genocide.⁹⁸ In a similar vein, Johan Pottier argues that “[t]he seeds of inequality . . . had been cast when King Rwabugiri . . . imposed his administration and harsh rule on formerly autonomous local lineages.”⁹⁹ As a result, in the words of Catherine Newbury, “Tutsis and Hutus became political labels; ‘ethnicity’ was considered so significant that it became politically important, defining not only a person’s social opportunities but also their relations with the authorities.”¹⁰⁰ Moreover, even though there seems to have been a degree of social mobility between the three ethnic groups before 1860, it was much more seldom after that date.¹⁰¹ Crucially, this counter-discourse suggests that social tensions existed *before* the arrival of colonialism—even though they were radicalized during this period—and the polarization between Hutu and Tutsi had already started. After their arrival, European colonisers adopted the central institution and built on existing structures including ethnic divisions to pursue their own political ends.¹⁰² As a consequence, instead of being beyond responsibility, Rwandan elites largely determined how the colonial powers influenced the transformation of clientship ties.¹⁰³ These claims stand in contrast to both the essentialist view of colonial anthropology which draws on the migration of different population groups *and* the government’s view that the categories were “invented” by the colonialist.

As stated by way of introduction, it is not the objective of this article to argue for the right interpretation of the past but to illustrate the ambivalence of the current official interpretation. For despite the contested nature of its history discourse, the government continues disseminating its interpretation, and related “unification policy,” with much rigor. For “unity,” a senior RPF officer explained, “is not a choice but a historical fact.”¹⁰⁴ The government has introduced a sense of narrative closure on the interpretation of the past, a closure which it actively polices. Narrative closure refers to the “process through which narratives seal off alternative interpretations to themselves.”¹⁰⁵ While a sense of closure might be an important requirement to provide meaning in a post-war environment, it obstructs alternative, less exclusive interpretations of the past. One public institution instrumental in this context is the National Unity and Reconciliation Commission (NURC), under whose auspices *ingandos* fall and which has the mandate of “searching for uniting factors and to chart the way forward within Rwandan Society in sustainable peace.”¹⁰⁶ NURC has published a number of documents about the unity of Rwandans which narrate the historical development of the country.¹⁰⁷ In addition to *ingando*, the Commission distributes its particular narrative about the past through civic education programmes, including song competitions; sport events; training materials; youth theatre; poems, cartoons and radio broadcasts. NURC is, therefore, an effective vehicle for distributing a particular interpretation of Rwanda’s history. As stated by one of its officers in an interview, since brainwashing led to the genocide, NURC brainwashes, too.¹⁰⁸ As conceded by President Kagame, “[w]e use communication and information warfare better than anyone.”¹⁰⁹

Crucially, despite these counter-discourses, the government insists on the truthfulness of its account and any deviation is legally prosecuted as “divisionist,” a criminal offence added to Rwanda’s penal code in 2002. According to the law, divisionism is defined as “the use of any speech, written statement, or action that divides people, that is likely to spark conflicts among people, or that causes an uprising which might degenerate into strife among people based on discrimination.”¹¹⁰ As a consequence, any mention of the labels “Hutu,” “Tutsi” or “Twa” is prohibited in public discourses. In case of offence, individuals are threatened or arrested, newspapers closed down, political parties banned, NGOs prohibited and even international organizations expelled.¹¹¹ As the 2002 law states,

[a]ny person who makes public any speech, writing, pictures or images or any symbols over radio airwaves, television, in a meeting or public place, with the aim of discriminating [against] people or sowing sectarianism [divisionism] among them is sentenced to between one year and five years of imprisonment and fined between five hundred thousand (500,000) [US\$1,000] and two million (2,000,000) Rwandan francs [US\$4,000] or only one of these two sanctions.¹¹²

Central to deeming all references to Hutu, Tutsi and Twa “divisionist” is the argument that, as discussed above, ethnic identities did not exist prior to colonialism but were invented by the “white men,” and it forms a substantial part of the government’s effort to un-make ethnic differences and to unify the nation. The

government's invention of the concept *Rwandité* as a collective national identity influences, or rather enforces, the manner in which the Rwandan nation should imagine itself. In the words of Anastase Shyaka on behalf of NURC: "The re-foundation of inclusive and reconciling national identity—the *Rwandité*—is an excellent vector for effective citizenship."¹¹³

In the same vein, accusations of "divisionism" are being used as vigorous mechanisms to silence any opposition to, and critique of, the government.¹¹⁴ During the 2003 parliamentary and presidential elections, for instance, "divisionism" was used to disqualify Kagame's political opponents and to secure his and the RPF's victory.¹¹⁵ This reflects a longer ongoing process of coercion and intimidation, leading many critics of the government to flee into exile.¹¹⁶ Simultaneously, the media and civil society institutions are repressed and their freedom of speech is severely restricted. For instance, a recent, supposedly independent, parliamentary investigation into lingering genocide ideology (2004) accused a number of critical international and national organisations of contributing to divisionism. The NGOs named in the report include Trocaire, Care International, Norwegian People's Aid as well as the national human rights organisation LIPRODHOR (*Ligue rwandaise pour la promotion et la défense des droits de l'homme*), one of the few critical voices in the country.¹¹⁷ Even though this led to an international outcry, the government continues its repressive politics.¹¹⁸

Conclusions

History narratives have been a central component in dividing Rwanda in the past. Nigel Eltringham and Saskia Van Hoyweghen go as far as arguing that "the genocide would not have occurred if there had been agreement within Rwandan society about common history and membership status to that very society."¹¹⁹ Today, the "true version" of the past is still contested. Nevertheless, the government uses its institutions to disseminate an account which portrays the pre-colonial past of the country as devoid of ethnic identities, peaceful and united and enforces this interpretation with much rigor, criminalising any deviation. This raises the question of ulterior motives. As stated above, the law on divisionism renders it possible to eradicate all criticism of the government. This is particularly important considering the ethnic composition of the RPF which dominates the government and which mainly consists of Tutsi who returned to Rwanda from exile after the 1994 genocide. It has, therefore, been argued that the government's endorsement of an all-Rwandan citizenship, or *Rwandité*, serves to mask the monopoly by Tutsi military and political power.¹²⁰ In contrast to the previous Hutu-dominated regimes, which assimilated ethnic and political majority and excluded Tutsi, the RPF-controlled regime founds its legitimacy on an anti-ethnic project of national restoration and a radically transformed founding discourse which only works to obscure the predominance of Tutsi in all domains of society.¹²¹ Instead of leading to national unity, however, it appears that this policy generates resentment among Rwandans, both Hutu and Tutsi,

and perpetuates the nation's division. An international project worker thus described Rwanda as a time bomb,¹²² while a Rwandan colleague explained that an increasing number of both Hutu and Tutsi are fleeing into exile.¹²³

In addition, despite the national unity narratives, ethnic identity remains of considerable importance to many Rwandans today. Regardless of their origins, the categories Hutu, Tutsi and Twa remain meaningful, not at least since a section of the population has been exterminated in their name. As suggested by a civil society activist: "If a survivor is told that someone killed their husband they know it was a Hutu and not just a Rwandan."¹²⁴ It could even be argued that ethnic identity is more significant after the genocide since its experience and repercussions affect the different population groups in different ways, stressing their dissimilarity.¹²⁵ As announced in the publication *The Unity of Rwandans*, and quoted above, the threefold strategy of the government is to establish the common ideal of unity as well as to create internal cohesion by reference to the colonialists as outside enemies, and by creating an internal enemy by stigmatising as "divisionist" anybody who dissents from its "no-ethnicity" narrative and unification policy. The politics of history teaching in Rwanda, therefore, illustrate that interpretations of the past are struggles over power and that they are profoundly political since they determine the form of the state and its social relations.

Yet, to avoid future conflict, instead of glossing over the past and pretending that Rwandans are beyond any conflicts, a more situated version of the past is required in which all members of society may recognize themselves. In order to move towards national unity and reconciliation it is not sufficient to narrate the nation whole—by using the same strategies that were deployed for its division—but to listen to the different stories that emerge from the different population groups and their particular experience as victims, perpetrators, bystanders, or heroes. It is paramount to ask why different groups draw on a particular narrative of the past; what form of belonging they seek to create in the process; and what function this serves in contemporary Rwanda. For there is always a "dialectic relationship between experience and narrative, between the narrating self and the narrated self."¹²⁶ People draw on their experience to shape narratives about their lives, but equally, their identities are shaped by their narratives. They are therefore at the same time products of their stories about themselves as much as their stories emerge from their lives. After violent conflict, in particular, through remembering the past in a particular way people try to render their lives more meaningful. This often entails constructing a more or less unified narrative in order to be able to identify with various categories, such as survivors, perpetrators, bystanders or heroes, which promise some form of belonging in a world full of contradictions and conflicts.

In other words, "being Rwandan" means different things to different Rwandans, and this is not per se negative or threatening, but an expression of having experienced one of the most horrendous events in recent history. As a result, instead of inventing one narrative to unite the nation—via a national identity which is based on political rather than ethnic belonging—it might be more effective to grant political rights to all parts of the society and to, responsively and carefully, encourage

a process of dialogue in which members of communities can articulate and share their respective experiences and views. In this sense, “people would all be Rwandans *and* have a right to their respective group identity. This requires recognising and accepting difference while doing some things together.”¹²⁷

As a consequence of opening up a political space and providing equal rights for all citizens, the narratives on which people draw to create their group identity might become less extreme. With the present being situated between past and future, a positive outlook and good prospects have an impact on how the past is recalled. In other words, if all Rwandans have less reasons to be antagonistic towards the government, because they feel represented and respected by it, than they might no longer see the necessity of drawing on extreme narratives about the past to secure their own identity in opposition to the government. In Rwanda today, however, this seems far off.

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