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# Transitional Justice, National Memory and History Teaching in Rwanda

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# **Transitional Justice, National Memory and History Teaching in Rwanda**

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In today's discourses, the Government of Rwanda draws on particular narratives about the country's past in order to unify the divided society into one nation. History narratives have been used at many stages in Rwanda's past to polarise and politicise social relations. Most tragically, they have been employed to incite hatred leading to the 1994 genocide. Consequently, at present, history remains a highly contested subject, 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.<sup>1</sup>

History is written by winners, Walter Benjamin famously remarked. After a violent conflict, the new power holders shape what is remembered and what is forgotten, their choice of narratives about the past is informed by their objectives for the future. National discourses narrate the past in a way that secures the new government's position, absolves it from all responsibilities of past crimes and creates 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 organise and control discourses in the public realm. In order to understand how this is the case in Rwanda this presentation first introduces the notion of unification policies to then analyse what particular narratives about the past are selected by the Government of Rwanda, how

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<sup>1</sup> See for instance S. Buckley-Zistel, "Dividing and Uniting. The Use of Citizenship Discourses in Conflict and Reconciliation in Rwanda," *Global Society* Vol. 20 No. 1, 2006; R. Lemarchand, 2000, 'Coming to Terms with the Past: The Politics of Memory in Post-Genocide Rwanda', *Observatoire de l'Afrique*; C. Newbury, "Ethnicity and the Politics of History in Rwanda." in eds. David E. Lorey and William H. Beezley, *Genocide, Collective Violence, and Popular Memory. The Politics of Remembrance in the 20th Century*, (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 2002); R. Lemarchand, 'The Politics of Memory in Post-Genocide Rwanda', Occasional Paper of the Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2007.

they are being disseminated by public institutions, and, lastly, what political performative function the history narratives have with regard to establishing unity and reconciliation in the divided society. Importantly, given the contentious nature of Rwandan history discourses, this presentation refrains from providing its own account of Rwanda's past but instead describes the various efforts of constructing and endorsing it.

### *Unification Policies after Violent Conflicts*

After violent conflicts, one key objective of narrating history is to unify a war-torn society or the nation. It is thus part of what can be called unification policies, i.e. top-down efforts to influence the relationship between parties to a conflict in order to turn a war-torn society into one 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 referring to narratives about a common past and future.

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 their authority, forge social cohesion and create a common culture.<sup>2</sup> For him, politics resembles a project of social engineering. Hobsbawm's notion of the nation is similar to Anderson's view of a nation as collectivity defined by its own manner of imagining

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<sup>2</sup> E. Hobsbawm, "Introduction: Inventing Traditions", in eds. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

itself.<sup>3</sup> The significance of both lies in their illustration of how 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.”<sup>4</sup>

So, if our identity is always rooted in the past, the question is not whether one should remember, but how.<sup>5</sup> The government of Rwanda has taken this concern to heart and engages in a deliberate effort of narrating the history of Rwanda in a manner that, so it argues, leads to nation-building and unity.

### Pre-colonial Harmony and Unity

Let’s look at the government’s interpretation of the past in more detail. According to its history discourse, prior to the arrival of first German and then Belgian colonialists the relationship between Hutu, Tutsi and Twa was characterised by harmony and it 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 statues. They were not static but social mobility was possible by marriage and changes in economic circumstances. 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.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991).

<sup>4</sup> A. Barahona de Brito, P. Aguilar and C. Gonzales-Eriquez, "Introduction", in eds. Alexandra de Brito, *et al.*, *The Politics of Memory. Transitional Justice in Democratizing Societies*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p38.

<sup>5</sup> J. Habermas, "What Does Working Off the Past Mean?" in ed. Jürgen Habermas, *A Berlin Republic: Writings on Germany*, (Oxford: Polity, 1997). See also S. Buckley-Zistel, *Remembering after Violence. Conflict Transformation and Social Change in Uganda* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2008 (forthcoming)).

<sup>6</sup> O. o. t. P. Republic of Rwanda, 'Report on the Reflection Meetings Held in the Office of the President of the Republic from May 1998 to March 1999', Kigali: Office of the President, 1999a, p18.

Ethnicities did not exist, conflicts did not occur, and all people considered themselves one nation. 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.

But what, according to the government, destroyed this peace and unity? It argues that it was destroyed by first German (1890-1916) and then a Belgian (1916-62) colonialism. Based on racial scholarship as 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).<sup>7</sup> Moreover, they introduced the now-discredited 'Hamitic hypothesis', which argues that Tutsi originate from northern Africa while Hutu belong to the Bantu people and constitute, together with the Batwa, the indigenous population of Rwanda. This account of origin implies that while Hutu and Twa are indigenous to Rwanda, Tutsi are merely immigrants. Rendering Tutsi immigrants had serious repercussions during the 1994 genocide since part of the racist discourse and hate speech that mobilised for the killings stated to get rid of these feudal occupiers, i.e. to kill them.

. 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. According to today's government – but also more widely accepted – the combination of history writing, ethnic categorising and divide-and-rule strategy of the European colonisers had a pervasive impact. The Tutsi elite adopted its ascribed nobility and collaborated with the European historians to invent its past to legitimate its

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<sup>7</sup> C. K. Mulinda, "La généalogie de l'idée du peuplement du Rwanda: considérations sur l'autochtonie ou l'allochtonie des rwandais", in ed. Faustin/Ntaganda Rutembesa, Eugene/Murwanashyaka, Justin, *Peuplement du Rwanda. Enjeux et Perspectives*, (Butare: Editions de l'Université Nationale du Rwanda, 2002), p50-1.

superiority.<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup> This led to a growing feeling of inferiority and resentment against both colonial and Tutsi supremacy amongst Hutu. Eventually, it culminated in the so-called Social Revolution of 1959 which overthrew the Tutsi leadership, led to the first massacres of Tutsi and to their mass exodus.

The government's interpretation of the causes for ethnic divisions and ultimately the genocide are central to the following statement: "[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".<sup>10</sup> What is crucial about this interpretation is that an outside party – the colonial powers – is blamed for ethnic hatred, absolving all Hutu and Tutsi from responsibility. The narrative has a cohesive function since it binds Hutu and Tutsi together under the guise of victimhood, they were equally victims of colonial practise. It hence serves the purpose of uniting the nation.

## PROVIDE BRIEF SUMMARY OF TUTSI AND HUTU PERSPECTIVES

Despite these different views, the government has a clear idea about its interpretation of the past. A recent publication of the National Unity and Reconciliation Commission (NURC) therefore suggests that – since there was unity in Rwanda prior to the arrival of the colonialists – two conclusions can be drawn: 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

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<sup>8</sup> HRW, *"Leave None to Tell the Story." Genocide in Rwanda* (Washington: Human Rights Watch, 1999), p36.

<sup>9</sup> Newbury, "Ethnicity and the Politics of History", p71.

<sup>10</sup> PRI, 'From Camp to Hill, the Reintegration of Released Prisoners', Kigali: PRI, 2004, p28.

groups. Second, those conflicts [are] more politically-based than anthropologically-based.”<sup>11</sup> This implies that if conflicts in Rwanda are neither racial, tribal or ethnic but only results of political calcule and manipulation this process can be reversed and un-made in order to promote unification after the violence of 1994. In essence, the view taken is that if antagonism can be constructed through history narratives it can also be un-constructed. History is thus seen as both source of the problem and its solution.

To overcome past divisions, the stated objective of the government is to change the and views of the population and to promote a collective national identity and a culture of unity. As stated by the Rwandan Minister for Good Governance:

The historical process the Rwandan have passed through has created sectarian conditioned *Munyarwanda* 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.<sup>12</sup>

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.

### *Teaching History after the Genocide*

Against the backdrop of the detrimental impact of different interpretations of Rwanda’s past, teaching history and developing a curriculum has become a serious challenge. Prior to the genocide, the curriculum was based on the colonisers’ interpretation of the various origins of Hutu, Tutsi and

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<sup>11</sup> A. Shyaka, 'The Rwandan Conflict. Origin, Development, Exit Strategies', Kigali: NURC, 2004, p10.

<sup>12</sup> P. Musoni, 'The End of the Transition Period: Prospects and Challenges', Paper presented at the Workshop on Citizenship and Social Reconstruction in the Aftermath of Genocide, National University of Rwanda, March 2003 2003, p. 13.

Twa and perpetuated the argument of migration and ethnic differences.<sup>13</sup> According to the government, this segregation in school was executed in a number of ways, for instance by 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.<sup>14</sup>

Against this backdrop, 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 its teaching.<sup>15</sup> As early as April 1995, a conference took place which recommended to place a moratorium on history teaching until guidelines as to how to teach history were available.

However, 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* – or civic education camps, as the government translates the term. In their current form, *ingandos* were first introduced in 1996 after the genocide in order to integrate Hutu ex-combatants and ex-insurgents – both from within the country as well as from refugee camps abroad. Later, they expanded their scope 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.

In total, a significantly large portion of the society passes through these education camps. One particular *ingando* runs from two weeks to four months and it is estimated that each year approximately 3000 students undergo training.<sup>16</sup> While regular *ingandos* address up to 300-400

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<sup>13</sup> F. Rutembesa, "Le discours sur le peuplement comme instrument de manipulation identitaire", in eds. Faustin Rutembesa, *et al.*, *Peuplement du Rwanda. Enjeux et Perspectives*, (Butare: Editions de l'Université Nationale du Rwanda, 2002), p83.

<sup>14</sup> J. Rutayisire, J. Kabano and J. Rubagiza, 2003, Rwanda: Synopsis of the Case Study, IBE/UNESCO, [www.ibe.unesco.org/Regional/social\\_cohesion/pdf/synrwanda.pdf](http://www.ibe.unesco.org/Regional/social_cohesion/pdf/synrwanda.pdf). (accessed 22.11.2003).

<sup>15</sup> J.-D. Gasanabo, 'L'holocauste et le génocide comme thème d'enseignement à l'école: le cas du Rwanda', Paper presented at the Conference Learning and Remembering: The Holocaust, Genocide and State Organized Crime in the Twentieth Century, Berlin, 12-15 March 2003, p. 3-4.

<sup>16</sup> P. Nantulya, "African Nation-Building and Reconstruction: Lessons from Rwanda," *Conflict Trends* Vol. 1, 2006. p48



people, those for released genocidaires include up to 1.800 participants.<sup>17</sup> Their outreach and potential impact in a society of approximately eight to nine million is therefore considerable. Consequently, *ingandos* potentially have a “direct impact on the beliefs, attitudes and behaviour of the people who attend them”.<sup>18</sup>

But in the absence of a national history curriculum, what version of the past is being taught in ingando? The international NGO Penal Reform International – which itself contributes modules to the ingando training – has compiled a typology of history narratives taught in the education camps which serve as a unique insight into the ‘black box’ of ingando. According to their records, 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. The government thus uses ingando as an opportunity to disseminate its particular version of the past and to influence the large number of participants according to its unification agenda. In addition, it distributes its particular narrative about the past by other mechanisms, such as a civic education programmes including song competitions, sport events, training materials, youth theatre as well as poems, songs, cartoons and radio broadcasts more generally. As stated by a NURC officers in an interview, since brainwashing led to the genocide, the government brainwashes, too. Or, as explained by President Kagame, “[w]e use communication and information warfare better than anyone”.<sup>19</sup>

Despite 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. Divisionism refers to all mentioning of ethnic identity, in other words, in Rwanda today it is impossible to publicly refer to the categories and even privately individuals are very reluctant to

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<sup>17</sup> This was the highest number I encountered when visiting several *ingandos* in 2003-2004.

<sup>18</sup> PRI, 'From Camp to Hill', p23.

reveal their belonging. The basis of the law against divisionism is the governments view that ethnic identities are merely colonial interventions and that not referring to them undermines their relevance, leading to enhanced national reconciliation.

Yet, accusations of divisionism are being used as extremely vigorous mechanisms to silence any opposition to and critique of the government.<sup>20</sup> During the 2003 parliamentary and presidential elections, for instance, they were used to disqualify President Kagame's political opponents and to secure his and the RPF-party's victory.<sup>21</sup> This reflects a wider process of coercion and intimidation, leading many critics of the government to escape into exile.<sup>22</sup> 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 national unity and an all-Rwandan citizenship, only serves to mask the monopoly by Tutsi military and political power.<sup>23</sup> Thus, in contrary 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 cover-up the predominance of Tutsi in all domains of the society.<sup>24</sup> Instead of leading to national unity this causes much resentment amongst Rwandans, both Hutu and Tutsi, and perpetuates the nation's division.

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<sup>19</sup> Quoted in J. Pottier, *Re-Imagining Rwanda. Conflict, Survival and Disinformation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p53.

<sup>20</sup> Buckley-Zistel, "Dividing and Uniting." p110-2.

<sup>21</sup> For a critical evaluation of the elections see the monitoring report European Union, *Rwanda: Election Presidentielle 25 Aout 2003; Election Legislatives 29 et 30 Septembre, 2 Octobre 2003. Mission d'Observation Electoral de l'Union Européenne. Rapport Final* (Brussels: European Union, 2004).

<sup>22</sup> International Crisis Group, 'Rwanda at the End of the Transition: a Necessary Political Liberalisation', Nairobi/Brussels: ICG, 2002, p11.

<sup>23</sup> F. Reyntjens, "Rwanda, Ten Years On: from Genocide to Dictatorship," *African Affairs* Vol. 103, 2004. p187

<sup>24</sup> R. Brauman, S. Smith and C. Vidal, "Rwanda: politique de terreur, privilège d'impunité," *Espirt* Vol. August-September, 2000. p151.

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 have become meaningful, not at least since a section of the population has been exterminated in their name. 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.<sup>25</sup> PRI therefore concludes that the government's history narratives are wrong about a number of aspects, either because of its interpretation or because of its omissions. This includes their "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."<sup>26</sup>

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 the society recognise 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, by-standers, or heroes.

In other words, being Rwandan means different things to different Rwandans, and this is not *per se* negative or threatening but rather 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 grants political rights to all parts of the society and to, responsively and carefully,

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<sup>25</sup> S. Buckley-Zistel, "Remembering to Forget. Chosen Amnesia as a Strategy for Local Coexistence in Post-Genocide Rwanda," *Africa* Vol. 76 No. 2, 2006. p131

<sup>26</sup> PRI, 'From Camp to Hill', p24.

encourage a dialogical process in which the members of the communities can articulate and share their respective experiences and views. Opening up the political space and providing equal rights for all citizens might result in the fact that the narratives on which people draw to create their group identity 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 being 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, toady, this seems far off.