

MAGNA

History

Ramifications of Rwandan Identity

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Abstract

In 1994, after more than 600 years of conflict between the Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda, a genocide erupted that claimed the lives of almost 800,000 people. The violence between these two groups was rooted in a hierarchical class system, where the people in power maintained their position by weaponizing identity and subjugating others based on perceived superiority. When European imperialists colonized the region, they used this class system as a means of control. While historians have often focused on the impact of colonialism and trajectories of economic disparity as key factors in the power struggles in Rwanda, this paper adds an in-depth exploration of the weaponization of identity that goes back to the beginnings of Rwanda as a nation-state. This essay engages in a fresh examination of the precursors to the Rwandan genocide, giving particular attention to African sources and narratives predating European involvement in the region. By using the framework of the weaponization of identity and applying moral disengagement theory, a clear pattern emerges: Those in power weaponized identity, defining who was or was not authentically Rwandan to serve their purposes, and the fight over identity became a sociopolitical force that shaped the trajectory of the nation and ultimately triggered a genocide. An examination of the weaponization of identity helps answer the essential question of how genocides are possible.

Almost three decades have passed since the Rwandan genocide occurred, and human remains are still being discovered. With a death toll of nearly 800,000,¹ the Rwandan genocide haunts Rwanda to this day. Although modern narratives discuss three distinct groups involved in the conflict, Hutus, Tutsis, and Twa, the exact dates that those labels were first used are unclear. What historians agree on is that the area now known as Rwanda was home to three groups of people for hundreds of years before European colonists arrived in the 1800s: those who were indigenous to the region's forests, those who were cattle herders, and those who were agrarian.² They lived together in clans or tribes. It was not until much later that those groups were labeled as we now know them: Twa, Tutsi, and Hutu. Over time, conflict developed between members of the clans, and power struggles escalated. When European imperialists colonized the region in the late 1800s, the conflict intensified, culminating in genocide in 1994. While historians have often focused on the impact of colonialism and trajectories of economic disparity as key factors in the power struggles in Rwanda, an in-depth exploration of the weaponization of identity is needed. Throughout Rwandan history, those in power weaponized identity, defining who was or was not authentically Rwandan to serve their own purposes. The fight over authentic "Rwandanness" and the cycles of vengeance it triggered became a sociopolitical force that was a key factor in shaping the trajectory of the nation.

Initially, the clans and tribes were heterogeneous, each clan containing members who would later be labeled as Hutu, Tutsi, and Twa.³ Although there are conflicting opinions on the beginning of identity grouping according to those labels, historians agree that at this time identities were not in intense dispute.⁴ Rigidly defined, disparate identities began to develop when socioeconomic striations began to form.⁵

¹ Verpoorten Marijke, "The Death Toll of the Rwandan Genocide: A Detailed Analysis for Gikongoro Province," *Population* 60, no. 4 (2005): 2, <https://doi.org/10.3917/popu.504.0401>.

² Alison Des Forges, *Leave None To Tell The Story: Genocide in Rwanda* (New York, NY: Human Rights Watch, 1999), 25, accessed October 30, 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/reports/pdfs/r/rwanda/rwanda993.pdf>.

³ Sarah Warshauer Freedman et al., *The Teaching of History of Rwanda A Participatory Approach A Resource Book For Teachers For Secondary Schools In Rwanda*, trans. Emeritha Muhongwanseko (The Regents of the University of California, 2006), 6, accessed October 30, 2021.

⁴ Freedman et al., *The Teaching*, 6.

⁵ *Ibid.*

Origin narratives influenced perceptions of who came first and who has a birthright. The dominant Western narrative was that the cattle-herding Tutsis arrived in the region last and assumed power over the indigenous Twa and the agrarian Hutus.⁶ This narrative undermines the complexity of Rwandan identity by failing to acknowledge the way that all three groups lived collaboratively in clans before socioeconomic classes took hold.⁷ It creates a mythology of intrinsic ethnic division and power dynamics. In reality, the labels Hutu, Tutsi, and Twa were assigned much later when the society began to morph into a monarchy. Understanding the impact of origin narratives is essential in understanding the way that identity was weaponized later in Rwandan history. Over and over, the people in power used the ambiguity surrounding Rwandan origins to justify their belief that they came first and were therefore the legitimate Rwandans.

The Beginning of Clans and Tutsi and Hutu Identity in Rwanda

As the clans developed socioeconomic striations, the cattle-herding upper class and the agrarian lower class created a social hierarchy that allowed for social mobility. Both groups had important roles in society, and individuals could move between groups depending on the nature of their work, accomplishments, and marriages.⁸ The cattle herders, who were the upper class or elite, were known as Tutsis.⁹ The agrarian and laboring lower class were known as Hutus.¹⁰ The indigenous people, who moved deeper into the forest,¹¹ became known as the Twa.¹² As Human Rights Watch explains, “The word ‘Tutsi,’ which first described the status of an individual – a person rich in cattle – became the term that referred to the elite group as a whole and the word ‘Hutu’ – meaning originally a subordinate or follower of a more

⁶ U.S. Department of State, “Background Note: Rwanda,” U.S. Department of State, last modified January 20, 2001, accessed November 6, 2021, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2861.htm>.

⁷ Freedman et al., *The Teaching*, 6.

⁸ Catharine Newbury, *The Cohesion of Oppression: Clientship and Ethnicity in Rwanda, 1860-1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 6.

⁹ J. K. Rennie, “The Precolonial Kingdom of Rwanda: A Reinterpretation,” *Transafrican Journal of History* 2, no. 2 (1972): 32, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24520214>.

¹⁰ Rennie, “The Precolonial,” 32.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 23-25

¹² Anton Scholz, *Hutu, Tutsi, and the Germans: Racial Cognition in Rwanda under German Colonial Rule*, ed. Jan Bart Gewald, Meike Goede, and Klaas Van Walraven (Leiden University, 2015), 18, PDF.

powerful person – came to refer to the mass of the ordinary people.”¹³ Over time, Tutsis became known for being wealthier, and Hutus became known as subordinate. People in Rwandan society during this period were accustomed to social mobility and unaccustomed to power dynamics rigidly entrenched based on birth. If a member of one group aspired to be in the other group, he could take action to make that change. “Through marriage and clientage, Hutus could become hereditary Tutsis, and Tutsis could become hereditary Hutus.”¹⁴ As the gap in socioeconomic status widened, and Tutsis accumulated greater wealth, characteristics associated with being Tutsi became favorable and desirable, which set the stage for their accumulation of power that allowed them to define “Rwandanness.”

Following that period of social mobility, a centralized monarchy was formed.¹⁵ At first, the clans had “chiefs [who] were called Mwamis, and some of them were Hutus, some Tutsis.”¹⁶ Then the mythology surrounding the *mwami* changed, which was a pivotal moment in defining who was or was not authentically Rwandan. The new mythology ascribed divine origin to Tutsi *mwami* only, and they became the most powerful people in the new class system.¹⁷ In the mid-16th century, a *mwami* named Mibambwe I Mutabazi used the myth of divine origin to centralize his power.¹⁸ Because of the authority imparted by divine infallibility, claiming divine origin gives a ruler inarguable authority. Now, the Tutsis’ claim to superiority and power was no longer founded solely in economics but in religion. Hutus could still hope to increase their social standing by amassing cattle, but there was nothing they could do to put divine blood in their veins; therefore, they would never achieve the same status and power as the Tutsi. The *mwami* soon began to

¹³ Alison Des Forges, *Leave None To Tell The Story: Genocide in Rwanda* (New York, NY: Human Rights Watch, 1999), 33, accessed October 30, 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/reports/pdfs/r/rwanda/rwanda993.pdf>.

¹⁴ Philip Gourevitch, *We Wish to Inform you that Tomorrow we will be Killed with our Families: Stories from Rwanda* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999), 47, digital file.

¹⁵ Déogratias Byanafashe and Paul Rutayisire, *History of Rwanda: From the Beginning to the End of the Twentieth Century* (Kigali: National Unity and Reconciliation Commission (NUCRC), 2016), 99.

¹⁶ Gourevitch, *We wish*, 47.

¹⁷ Tor Sellstrom et al., *The International Response to Conflict and Genocide: Lessons from the Rwanda Experience. Study 1, Historical Perspective: Some Explanatory Factors* (Denmark: Joint Evaluation of Emergency Assistance to Rwanda, 1996), 24.

¹⁸ Colin McMillin, “Dynamics of Discourse: Power and Politics in Precolonial Rwanda” (master’s thesis, University of Missouri-Columbia, 2014), 66, accessed July 25, 2022, <https://mospace.umsystem.edu/xmlui/bitstream/handle/10355/45680/research.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>.

embody a systemic disadvantage to the Hutus by institutionalizing opportunities for Tutsis and further relegating Hutus.

As a divine figure in this new class system, the *mwami* came to be revered as the personal embodiment of the state. The *mwami* valued subjects who shared his heritage above those who did not, and “they evolved the political institution of the *mwami* as a sacred king ...regarded as the source of life...for the Rwandan kingdom.”¹⁹ By association with the *mwami* because of shared heritage, Tutsis began to represent Rwanda in a way that Hutus did not. If the *mwami* was a sacred source of Rwandan life, then the more one was like him, the more one was truly Rwandan. Tutsis now had an institutionalized foundation for othering the Hutus and developing a narrative that Tutsis were real Rwandans, while Hutus were not. This period in Rwandan history set the stage for the group with control to claim that they were the “real” Rwandans.

Then in the 17th century, the Tutsis and Hutus entered into a contract called *ubuhake* that purported to permit Hutus to use Tutsi cattle in exchange for providing personal and military services.²⁰ However, over time *ubuhake* mutated into a feudal hierarchy in which the Tutsis were most powerful despite being the minority, and ultimately only Tutsis were entitled to leadership roles.²¹ While the *ubuhake* was originally a mutually-beneficial business arrangement, it transformed over time into a tool that the Tutsis used to assume power and subjugate the Hutus. The client-patron nature of the *ubuhake* relationship inherently meant that the patron had more leverage in the agreement. With the creation of *ubuhake*, the Tutsis’ systemic advantage increased, further shaping Rwandan identity in the Tutsis’ favor. These strategies enabled the Tutsis to secure power despite being outnumbered by the Hutus.

In 1853, a *mwami* named Kigeli IV Rwabugiri took the throne.²² His rule was another pivotal moment in the history of the development of Rwandan identity. He inherited a hierarchical economic, political, and military system. He intensified the stratification, favoring Tutsis for positions of power. He expanded and consolidated Tutsi control over the state through a series of military campaigns to unite the clans under

¹⁹ Julius Adekunle, *Culture and Customs of Rwanda* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2007), 5.

²⁰ Byanafashe and Rutayisire, *History of Rwanda*, 118.

²¹ Willis Okech Oyugi, “Historicizing Ethnicity and Slave-Trade Memories in Colonial Africa: The Cases for Rwanda and Northern Cameroon,” *Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies* 39, no. 1 (2016): 73, <https://doi.org/10.5070/F7391029818>.

²² Byanafashe and Rutayisire, *History of Rwanda*, 79.

his leadership.²³ During Rwabugiri's reign, the region was governed by a complex, enormous hierarchical system of "military, political, and civil chiefs and governors, sub-chiefs, and deputy governors, sub sub-chiefs, and deputy governors [as well as] Priests, tax collectors, clan leaders, and army recruiters" who all swore allegiance to the *mwami*.²⁴ As the kingdom expanded, more sub-leaders were needed, and Tutsis were given those roles, while more of the Hutu populace was added to the kingdom in a subjugated position; the disparity grew. Tutsis wielded their identity to grab more power while Hutu laborers did the grunt work to fuel the kingdom's expansion with no possibility of rising in the ranks. This growth and institutionalization of Tutsi power further cemented the idea that to be Rwandan meant being Tutsi.

The Beginning of Colonization and the Weaponization of Identity

In 1894, Germany colonized an area of central Africa that included modern-day Rwanda.²⁵ When Germany sought imperial control in the region, the Germans saw an opportunity to leverage the existing hierarchy by leaving Mwami Rwabugiri in place as a figurehead, pitting the Tutsis and Hutus against each other, and giving Tutsis more powerful weapons.²⁶ The Tutsis already claimed superiority based on the divine origin of the *mwami* and higher economic standing, and the Germans validated that claim by telling them that they were superior according to European science and Christianity, claiming that the Tutsis were the descendants of King David²⁷ and pointing to Biblical narratives as proof.²⁸ Thanks to the Germans, the Tutsis could claim scientific proof²⁹ that they had been responsible for introducing "all culture and civilization in central Africa."³⁰ If the Tutsis were the creators of Rwandan culture and civilization, then they could claim that they were the true Rwandans and the Hutus were not, and they could weaponize identity to keep the Hutus subjugated and maintain Tutsi power.

Germany's imperialist strategy effectively leveraged the existing divide between Hutu and Tutsi to make it easier for the Germans to rule

²³ Sellstrom et al., *The International*, 21.

²⁴ Newbury, *The Cohesion*, 53.

²⁵ Britannica, "German East Africa," Britannica, accessed October 30, 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/place/German-East-Africa>.

²⁶ Timothy Longman, *Christianity and Genocide in Rwanda* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 33, digital file.

²⁷ Gourevitch, *We wish*, 50.

²⁸ Scholz, *Hutu, Tutsi*, 2.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 22.

³⁰ Gourevitch, *We wish*, 50.

from afar.³¹ Germany engaged in indirect rule, which meant placing a few Germans in positions of power while relying on Tutsis in high positions to do most of the daily governing.³² Relying on local leadership to enact colonial policy, such as tax collection, put distance between the Germans and the Rwandans and allowed them to avoid direct conflict. The impact of German rule was significant because the Tutsis, who were already more militarily powerful and wealthier than the Hutus, now had the backing of the even more powerful German forces and German finances, and they had the license to use those military resources to further subjugate the Hutus.³³ With the Germans empowering the Tutsis, encouraging them to pursue control of the Hutus, protecting the Tutsis from any Hutu backlash, and providing the Tutsis with weapons, resources, and new laws that legalized Tutsi hegemony, the presence of the Germans tipped the scales of power in Rwanda.³⁴ The addition of a third player, Germany, who brought money, weapons, and power to the conflict, changed the strategy of the pre-existing feuds. Although common narratives attribute the feuding solely to the colonists, the colonists leveraged a growing conflict where the Tutsis were marginalizing the Hutus to have complete control.

When the Allied Powers forced Germany to cede land under the Treaty of Versailles in the aftermath of World War I, Belgium took control of Rwanda and quickly saw the benefit of leveraging the existing conflict between groups in Rwanda to help them maintain imperial control.³⁵ The Belgians saw that the Tutsis wielded more power in Rwandan society and believed that it would be easier to rule by further institutionalizing the existing hierarchy. In a pivotal moment in Rwandan history, the Belgians intensified the Germans' approach by implementing ethnic identity cards, building schools to educate Tutsis but not Hutus, giving the highest governmental positions to Tutsis, and implementing economic policies that favored the Tutsis.³⁶ While the Germans encouraged Tutsi hegemony at all (often violent) costs, in the 1930s the Belgians made "preserving what they saw as 'traditional' structures of

³¹ "Brief History," The Embassy of the Republic of Rwanda Washington, DC. USA, accessed July 26, 2022, <https://rwandaembassy.org/about-rwanda>.

³² United Nations, "Rwanda: A Brief History of the Country," Outreach Programme on the 1994 Genocide Against the Tutsi in Rwanda and the United Nations, accessed October 30, 2021, <https://www.un.org/en/preventgenocide/rwanda/historical-background.shtml>.

³³ Scholz, "Hutu, Tutsi," 33.

³⁴ Sellstrom et al., *The International*, 24.

³⁵ U.S. Department of State, "Background Note," U.S. Department of State.

³⁶ Sellstrom et al., *The International*, 27.

power”³⁷ a cornerstone of their imperialism and made that conflict essential to their form of governing.³⁸ This hardening of identity roles fed in perfectly with the Tutsi weaponization of identity. According to Human Rights Watch, because the Belgians wanted to “limit administrative posts and higher education to the Tutsi, they were faced with the challenge of deciding exactly who was Tutsi.”³⁹ The Belgian’s solution was to register all Rwandans as either Hutu, Tutsi, or Twa. From that point forward, “all Rwandans born subsequently would also be registered as Tutsi, Hutu, or Twa at the time of their birth [and] the categories became so rigid and permanent.”⁴⁰ The impact of the Belgian policy was immediate: “The ruling [Tutsi] elite [were] the immediate beneficiaries of sharper demarcation from other Rwandans, [and] increasingly stressed their separateness and their presumed superiority. Meanwhile, Hutu, officially excluded from power, began to experience the solidarity of the oppressed.”⁴¹ A society that began with social mobility, then degenerated into a codified, feudalistic, rigid hierarchy, now became fully entrenched in rigid and divisive ethnic categories in service to two goals: the Europeans’ desire for wealth, resources, and dominance and the Tutsis’ belief that they were superior and the “real” Rwandans.

The colonists and the Tutsis were so effective at marginalizing the Hutus, that the Hutus started to see themselves as a separate group with interests unique to themselves. Once the Hutus were united under this shared, exclusive identity with interests specific to their group, they developed Hutu-specific objectives.⁴² Because their main goal was freedom from subjugation, they sought control and power and wanted to define themselves as the “real” Rwandans.

As a result of the oppression the Hutus experienced at the hands of the Germans, Belgians, and Tutsis, a Hutu nationalistic identity took shape; Hutus, united around their own goals, began to see themselves as the rightful Rwandans and fought back. As European colonialism was ending in the region in the 1950s, both the existing Tutsi monarchy and the newly formed Hutu political party petitioned the United Nations (UN) for control of the country, declaring themselves the rightful

³⁷ Catharine Newbury, “Ethnicity in Rwanda: The Case of Kinyaga,” *Africa* 48, no. 1 (January 1978): 11, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1158708>.

³⁸ Scholz, “*Hutu, Tutsi*,” 2.

³⁹ Forges, *Leave None*, 38.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Newbury, *The Cohesion*, 14.

Rwandans.⁴³ The Tutsis had the historical precedent, and the Hutus had the overwhelming majority. The Europeans had introduced a myth about the Tutsis arrival in the region to help them support the claim of Tutsi superiority, and the Hutus embraced that myth because it allowed them to argue that if the Tutsis were foreign invaders, as the Europeans' myth claimed, then Rwanda was a nation of the Hutu majority that had been invaded.⁴⁴ At this point in Rwandan history, the Hutus did not want to abolish ethnic identity cards because they did not want to prevent "the statistical law from establishing the reality of facts"⁴⁵ that the Hutus were the majority. Hutu leaders rallied the masses "to unite in their 'Hutuness.'"⁴⁶ Experiencing the solidarity of the oppressed united the Hutus in a common identity and around shared goals in a way they had not been united before. They needed leaders from among them to organize and accomplish their goals, and when the Tutsis in power refused to include Hutu leaders in government, Hutus began to view their Hutu leaders as the rightful leaders of Rwanda. In 1957, when the Tutsi *mwami* and his High Council presented a report to the UN decolonization mission demanding a rapid transfer of power from the colonial authorities to the Tutsi King of Rwanda and his council, the proclamation argued that such action "was crucial to ending racial tensions between blacks and whites."⁴⁷ In response, Hutu leaders published the Bahutu Manifesto that asserted that the conflict in Rwanda was *not* between whites and blacks, as the *mwami* had claimed, but rather the Hutus' struggle against both white colonialists and the Tutsi Hamitic invaders. They demanded to be liberated "from both the 'Hamites' and 'Bazungu' (whites) colonization," identifying what they saw as a "political monopoly...held by...the Tutsi" as the "indigenous racial problem."⁴⁸ Petitioning the UN to be recognized as the legitimate Rwandan government was a fight for each group's lives because whichever group was granted power after the Belgians left would shape the future of the nation as an independent country. Whichever group the UN chose to recognize affirmed that the members of the group were the real Rwandans. Whomever the UN recognized as the legitimate government would be recognized as the legitimate government by the most powerful other nations in the world.

⁴³ Amanda E. Rollinson, "Agency, Identity, and Authority in Rwanda: 1950s Political Rhetoric as a Bridge to Post-Colonial Genocide" (master's thesis, Duquesne University, 2020), 19, accessed July 26, 2022, <https://dsc.duq.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2899&context=etd>.

⁴⁴ Gourevitch, *We wish*, 58.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Mahmood Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers: Colonialism, Nativism, and the Genocide in Rwanda* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 116.

⁴⁸ Mamdani, *When Victims*, 116.

The 1950s were a decade of escalating conflict and violence between Tutsis and Hutus, and Belgian administrators were forced to declare a state of emergency and attempt to rectify the imbalance of power that they had helped create, but declaring a state of emergency was ineffectual. In 1959, out of desperation to retain control of the region, the Belgians reversed course and went from backing Tutsis in power to backing Hutus because the Hutus, who were the majority of the population, had grown into a formidable force once they unified around common goals. The Belgians attempted to hold elections for communal councils to diffuse rising tension between Hutu and Tutsi, and when that failed, the Belgian authorities chose to recognize the Hutu-led republican Rwandan State because they believed that would be the way to prevent further unrest.⁴⁹ Generations of weaponizing identity and the resulting cycles of vengeance made a union between the two groups seem impossible. The fight over Rwandan identity was a sociopolitical force that shaped the trajectory of the nation. Rwanda attained independence without a stable transition of power.

The End of Belgian Rule and a New Hutu Rwanda

With the outgoing Belgian government and the UN recognizing the Hutu government, Hutus now wielded power over the Tutsis.⁵⁰ After hundreds of years of indoctrination that Tutsis were the true Rwandans, while the Hutus were innately inferior, being Tutsi no longer meant being the embodiment of Rwanda; it meant being a minority in a Hutu society. Hutu leaders reversed the weaponization of identity by shifting the narrative so that Tutsis were portrayed as foreigners and the Hutu majority was encouraged to consider themselves the real Rwandans. While the Tutsis were focused on removing the Belgians from power, the Hutus were focused on decolonizing *and* eliminating the Tutsi elite by labeling the Tutsis as invaders equivalent to the colonizers.⁵¹ In other words, Hutus were real Rwandans, and Tutsis and Belgians were foreigners who needed to be removed from control.

Faced with retaliatory violence from Hutus, Tutsis began to flee Rwanda in late 1959, and when the monarchy began to fall in 1960, thousands more followed. Violence erupted between Hutus and Tutsis. When a group of Tutsi youth assaulted a Hutu sub-chief, the incident sparked significant ethnic violence.⁵² Historians estimate that hundreds

⁴⁹ Catharine Newbury, "Ethnicity in Rwanda: The Case of Kinyaga," *Africa* 48, no. 1 (January 1978): 13, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1158708>.

⁵⁰ Sellstrom et al., *The International*, 8.

⁵¹ Gourevitch, *We wish*, 58.

⁵² Newbury, *The Cohesion*, 194.

of Tutsi people were killed in the early violence and many fled the country.⁵³ When the Belgians attempted to stop the violence, they made it worse, ushering in a social revolution.⁵⁴ Legislative elections held in 1960 and 1961 ended in a massive win for the Hutu far-right political party, PARMEHUTU, which was founded on the belief of Hutu supremacy; PARMEHUTU received 83 percent of the vote.⁵⁵ Some of the Tutsis who fled Rwanda organized themselves into armed groups. Over the next three years, those armed groups launched unsuccessful assaults into Rwanda from neighboring countries, and the Hutu-led Rwandan government retaliated against Tutsi civilians who remained in Rwanda. Approximately 20,000 people were killed in two years, and many more fled the country.⁵⁶ The Hutus felt that they had successfully driven out the Tutsi invaders, and a Hutu Rwandan identity formed around hatred of Tutsis. Meanwhile, the Tutsis, ostracized from what they viewed as their homeland, began to regroup in exile and make plans to fight for what they believed was rightfully theirs.

One of PARMEHUTU's founders, Gregoire Kayibanda, became the first prime minister and then president of Rwanda and led the nation for a decade.⁵⁷ The Tutsi elite had rejected any discussion of equality when they were in power. Now, the new Hutu government abolished the Tutsi monarchy, sending the message that "Hutu nationalist activities were directed at...the dominant Tutsi group."⁵⁸ The Hutu government was bolstered because, in a 1962 referendum on whether to uphold the monarchy, monarchists only won 20 percent of the vote.⁵⁹ Following that referendum, Kayibanda referred to the Hutus and Tutsi as "two nations in a single state."⁶⁰ Abolishing the monarchy and stripping the Tutsi *mwami* of power symbolically destroyed the idea that to be Tutsi was the embodiment of Rwanda. When Kayibanda embraced the construct of separate ethnic identities, as had the colonists before him, the choice became binary: If Tutsis were not Rwanda, then Hutus were. The narrative of Tutsis as foreigners became further entrenched, and the number of Tutsis fleeing Rwanda and groups of Tutsi refugees mounting attacks to regain control during this period were seen as lending

⁵³ Peter Uvin, "Ethnicity and Power in Burundi and Rwanda: Different Paths to Mass Violence," *Comparative Politics* 31, no. 3 (April 1999): 256, <https://doi.org/10.2307/422339>.

⁵⁴ Mamdani, *When Victims*, 135.

⁵⁵ Newbury, *The Cohesion*, 198.

⁵⁶ Adekunle, *Culture and Customs*, 16.

⁵⁷ Sellstrom et al., *The International*, 28.

⁵⁸ Adekunle, *Culture and Customs*, 18.

⁵⁹ Byanafashe and Rutayisire, *History of Rwanda*, 401.

⁶⁰ Mamdani, *When Victims*, 127.

credence to that narrative.⁶¹ This shift in defining Rwandanness was validated when more than 80 percent of Rwandans voted to abolish the Tutsi monarchy, and Hutus in power used the vote as evidence that most of the population agreed that Hutus were the real Rwandans. At that point, the Tutsis began experiencing the solidarity of the oppressed as the Hutus had before them.

Between 1963 and 1973, another political leader, who took a more extreme anti-Tutsi position, was rising through the ranks of the Rwandan military and government: Juvenal Habyarimana.⁶² In 1973, Habyarimana was promoted to Major General, and three months later, he took control of Rwanda in a bloodless coup, establishing his political party, Le Mouvement Revolutionnaire National pour le Development (MRND), and establishing a dictatorship under which all other political parties were disbanded. He took advantage of the division that was growing within the Hutu community as the northern Hutus grew to resent the southern Hutus for “monopolizing the benefits of power.”⁶³ With his rise to power, Hutus from the north amassed control, splintering the concept of Rwandanness to favor one faction of Hutus over the rest.⁶⁴

Habyarimana was heavily influenced by a powerful, Northern Hutu organization led by his wife and her relatives. During Habyarimana’s rule, his home region in the northwest was referred to as the “blessed region,” and his power base came from this special organization, which was known as Akazu (“little house”) and “was a special circle...that worked to support Habyarimana...with Madame Habyarimana and her relatives playing a major role.”⁶⁵ According to Human Rights Watch, a drastic “imbalance in wealth and power” developed and there was “increasingly evident discrimination against Tutsi and Hutu from areas other than the ‘blessed region’.”⁶⁶ In the 1980s, Habyarimana established a system of quotas for employment, higher education, and resources. He claimed to be guaranteeing equitable distribution of resources and opportunities to all Rwandans, when in practice, “officials used the system to restrict the access of Tutsi to employment and higher education, and increasingly to discriminate against Hutu from regions other than the north.”⁶⁷ With this division between north and south, an imbalance of power growing, and faltering

⁶¹ Newbury, “Ethnicity in Rwanda,” 16.

⁶² Adekunle, *Culture and Customs*, 19.

⁶³ Forges, *Leave None*, 42.

⁶⁴ Newbury, *The Cohesion*, 211.

⁶⁵ Forges, *Leave None*, 46.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

national unity, the monolithic Hutu unity began to crumble. Wealthy Akazu members from the north essentially turned the government into a plutocratic oligarchy, creating policies that favored their interests and helped them maintain political power and control.⁶⁸ After years of all Hutus being glorified as authentic Rwandans, the conflict between north and south erupted and created a schism over Rwandan identity and access to education, economic growth, and power to shape the future of the society.⁶⁹ Suddenly, being Hutu alone did not guarantee privilege; one had to be a certain type of Hutu. Unemployment, lack of education, and lack of opportunity fueled increasing resentment among young Hutus.⁷⁰ Leaders in Habyarimana's government and Akazu members turned that resentment against the Tutsis to avoid southern Hutus revolting against the northern Hutus who were in power.

The Akazu recruited Hutu youth to form a pro-Hutu militia, which became officially known as the Interahamwe in 1990, and simultaneously, certain members of Akazu formed an extremist organization whose mission was to eliminate the Tutsi population entirely.⁷¹ These groups used moral disengagement tactics and spread propaganda via radio and social soccer clubs to dehumanize the Tutsis and foment Hutu violence against them.⁷² As early as 1959, Hutu leaders had employed strategies of moral disengagement, such as the stigmatization and dehumanization of the Tutsi, but they intensified this approach in the early 1990s. Hutu leaders began openly calling for the elimination of the Tutsi vermin and exterminating the cockroaches (*inyenzi*).⁷³ Thomas Kamilindi, a Tutsi journalist attempting to evacuate Rwanda with his two-year-old daughter in May of 1994, recalls how the Rwandan radio station *Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines* (RTLM) “called on the Interahamwe not to allow these inyenzi to be evacuated by [the United Nations] because ‘they would come back with weapons in their hands’.”⁷⁴ Kamilindi recounts, “The militia blocked us on the road to the airport. We were attacked...I have a daughter [who] was very small at the time. One day, somebody said, ‘That one is a snake. They have to kill her.’ She wasn’t even two years old. My daughter asked me, ‘Am I a snake? Am I a snake?’ Is that the role of the press? Is it the role of the

⁶⁸ Christophe, “To The President Of The National Republican Movement For Democracy And Development (MRND),” 1992, in *THE ZERO NETWORK*, 5, PDF.

⁶⁹ Newbury, *The Cohesion*, 211.

⁷⁰ Gourevitch, *We wish*, 94.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 93-95.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 94.

⁷³ Allan Thompson and Kofi A. Annan, *The Media and the Rwanda Genocide* (Ottawa: International Development Research Centre, 2008), 137-138, digital file.

⁷⁴ Thompson and Annan, *The Media*, 137-138.

media to harm people?”⁷⁵ Habyarimana’s government understood the power of the media to dehumanize the Tutsis and foment violence against them, as Kamilindi points out. The Akazu ran a powerful propaganda machine, and RTLM, which was financed by a wealthy Hutu extremist, was its mouthpiece. In a transcript of another RTLM broadcast from 1994, the announcer reads: “[N]o Rwandan, among those who have faith in the Republic, should expect any assistance from [Senegal, Ghana, Ethiopia, or Zimbabwe]. Instead, those of you who have faith in the Republic, stand up so that we may continue to kill the Inyenzi”⁷⁶ As Hutu youth were indoctrinated, the Hutu identity slowly shifted so that it was centered around an intolerance of Tutsis. Rhetoric about exterminating Tutsis was amassing more support with each passing month. This was a pivotal moment in the way those who were in control used identity as a weapon. The extremists understood the power of defining who was authentically Rwandan because it had been wielded for hundreds of years of Rwandan history as a tool for control and authority. As a result, they also understood the power of dehumanization. At this point, the othering became so aggressive that the rhetoric was no longer “We are more Rwandan than you;” it became “We are more human than you” and “We deserve to live, and you deserve to die.”

There is a reason why the genocidal rhetoric resonated with the Hutu population at this point in history. The conflict between Hutus and Tutsis was part of a cycle of vengeance that intensified over hundreds of years. It began with the *ubabake*, continued as the *mwami* built their empires, was wielded at the hands of the European imperialists and the Rwandans they empowered, and escalated even further when Rwandans regained sovereignty and Hutus gained power. At this point, the weaponization of identity had become standard operating procedure in Rwandan politics with extremists wielding the weapons of moral disengagement: dehumanization, propaganda, and diffusion of responsibility. After hundreds of years of these cycles of vengeance, in the face of potential civil war, the country was a powder keg ready to explode.

As the anti-Tutsi rhetoric within Rwanda intensified, Tutsis who had fled Rwanda organized a militia in Uganda, called the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), with a mission to take back control of Rwanda. The RPF was formally organized in 1987 and grew in power between 1987 and 1994. Hutus began to suspect their Tutsi neighbors of

⁷⁵ Thompson and Annan, *The Media*, 137-138.

⁷⁶ Nkurunziza, Ananie. 1994. “RTLM Tape no. 0022.” Concordia university, Kigali, June, 3-4, 1994. http://migs.concordia.ca/links/RwandanRadioTrascripts_RTLM.htm

colluding with the RPF, which they viewed as a foreign enemy. According to the United Nations, by the fall of 1990:

“Because of the RPF attacks which displaced thousands and a policy of deliberately targeted propaganda by the government, all Tutsis inside the country were labeled accomplices of the RPF, and Hutu members of the opposition parties were labeled as traitors. Media, particularly radio, continued to spread unfounded rumors, which exacerbated ethnic problems.”⁷⁷

Over many years, the Hutu population in Rwanda had been trained to consider their Tutsi neighbors as vermin. When the RPF organized and began to attack, they became the manifestation of many Hutus’ fears about the Tutsis re-taking power by violent means. Hutus began to suspect all Tutsis of being accomplices of the RPF. Furthermore, they suspected Hutus of being traitors if they spoke in defense of Tutsis.⁷⁸ In turn, the RPF gained Tutsi support as the Tutsis were further marginalized in Rwanda. Tutsis sought protection and wanted to regain access to opportunities. It became a self-fulfilling prophecy to believe that all Tutsis were aligned with the RPF, which left the Rwandan Tutsis with limited options other than to align themselves with the RPF.⁷⁹ In response to the RPF’s growing support among Tutsis, a growing Hutu Power movement gained support, followers, and funding as the tensions grew.

The Genocide Begins

Close associates of Habyarimana, led by a Hutu colonel named Bagosora and backed by the militia, had been galvanizing support for a Hutu Power movement and planning to slaughter massive numbers of Tutsis as well as any Hutu leaders who opposed Habyarimana. In 1990, the editor of the Hutu Power newspaper published “The Hutu 10 Commandments,”⁸⁰ which created a rule book for following the Hutu Power ideology. When Habyarimana’s plane was shot down on April 6, 1994, and he was killed, Bagosora and those who believed in the Hutu Power ideology saw their opportunity to seize control of Rwanda and trigger a Tutsi genocide.⁸¹ With Hutu Power and the 10 Hutu Commandments, being truly Rwandan was officially defined as taking up arms against Tutsis. This violent ideology was the culmination of

⁷⁷ United Nations, “Rwanda: A Brief,” Outreach Programme on the 1994 Genocide Against the Tutsi in Rwanda and the United Nations.

⁷⁸ Olga, Gatimbiro. “RTLTM_02Apr91994.” Concordia university, Kigali, April, 2, 1994. http://migs.concordia.ca/links/RwandanRadioTrascripts_RTLTM.htm

⁷⁹ Forges, *Leave None*, 54.

⁸⁰ Barbara Mora, *The Path to Genocide*, image, December 23, 2005, PDF.

⁸¹ Forges, *Leave None*, 6.

generations of honing identity as a weapon and weaponizing the definition of what it meant to be a Rwandan. Although Bagasora initially faced resistance from several high-ranking officials, the strategy of dehumanization had been effective enough that a large percentage of Hutus were ready to fight the Tutsis already. But not all of them. As HRW explains, “As authorities played on popular fears and greed, some people picked up their machetes and came readily. Others came more slowly, and some refused to come, even at the risk of their lives.”⁸² There was a percentage of the Hutu population who did not believe in harming the Tutsis, so in the early 1990s, the government turned its attention to those Hutus and targeted them with an additional strategy of moral disengagement: diffusion of responsibility. The Hutu extremists made those Hutus who resisted believe that they would be hurt or killed if they did not fight the Tutsis.

“In some regions, particularly those where Habyarimana’s supporters were strongest, authorities needed to do little more than give the signal for Hutu to begin attacking Tutsi. In other areas, such as central and southern Rwanda, where Tutsi were numerous and well-integrated and where Habyarimana’s party had little standing, many Hutu initially refused to attack Tutsi and joined with them in fighting off assailants. Only when military and civilian authorities resorted to public criticism and harassment, fines, destruction of property, injury, and threat of death did these Hutu give up their open opposition to the genocide.”⁸³

By making anyone who resisted believe that they were in danger themselves, the Hutu extremists convinced a significant portion of the Hutu population to kill all Tutsis. It was a genocide. Although many dominant narratives claim colonial weaponization of identity led inexorably toward genocide, the colonial policies were only one layer in a complex, 400-year-long history that led Rwanda to this point.

Between April and July 1994, roughly half a million Tutsis and others who opposed the genocide were murdered. The death toll is disputed because the scale and brutality of the massacre made accurate recording difficult. It is estimated that in only 100 days, between 600,000 and 800,000 members of Rwanda’s Tutsi population were murdered,⁸⁴ leaving only 25 percent-30 percent of the population remaining.⁸⁵

⁸² Forges, *Leave None*, 10.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁸⁴ Marijke, “The Death,” 60.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 27.

Estimates for the number of Hutus killed range from 3,000 to 60,000.⁸⁶ It is estimated that one-third of the Twa population (approximately 10,000 people) were also murdered.⁸⁷ The violence occurred on a person-to-person level as vigilantes roamed the streets and invaded people's homes. In one instance, a survivor recounts how his brother-in-law "was stopped by interahamwe...and forced to lead them back to his house... Then he told the militiamen that he didn't want his family dismembered, so they invited him to throw his children down the latrine wells alive, and he did. Then [he and his wife] were thrown in on top."⁸⁸ Although the government incited the genocide, the violence took place among neighbors, colleagues, and individuals who took what they deemed to be justice into their own hands. When honed over hundreds of years, as it was in Rwanda, the weaponization of identity can become a sociopolitical force that can shape the trajectory of a nation.

While the Hutu Power government was focused on ethnic cleansing, in July and August of 1994 the RPF took control of the country, ending the genocide. The RPF installed a Tutsi leader and gave many positions of power to Tutsis, but the government, which still rules today, immediately implemented policies to abolish any discussions of heritage-based identity and created one Rwandan national identity for all citizens.⁸⁹ According to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, "The genocide ended when the Tutsi-dominated rebel movement [RPF]...overthrew the Hutu government and seized power. The new government announced a policy of 'unity and reconciliation.' It adopted a new constitution that guaranteed equal rights for all Rwandans regardless of their group."⁹⁰ The goal of the RPF's immediate and unequivocal action to abolish identity politics and implement equal rights for all Rwandans was to remove the ability to use identity as a weapon and stop the violence. With the RPF's military presence and legislative actions, the violence ceased. The fear of identity politics motivated decisions at all levels of government and society, including narratives

⁸⁶ Marijke, "The Death," 3.

⁸⁷ World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples, "Rwanda: Twa," World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples, accessed November 6, 2021, <https://minorityrights.org/minorities/twa-2/>.

⁸⁸ Gourevitch, *We wish*, 239.

⁸⁹ Zoe Flood, "Teaching Difficult Histories: Rwanda's Post-Genocide Experience," National Geographic, last modified May 1, 2014, accessed November 9, 2021, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/culture/article/140429-rwanda-genocide-hutu-tutsi-kigali-curriculum-world>.

⁹⁰ The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, "The Rwanda Genocide," The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, accessed October 30, 2021, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/the-rwanda-genocide>.

taught in schools and legislation specifically criminalizing “divisionism.” According to Baets:

“A few months later, in 1995 the new Tutsi-led government banned the old history curricula and textbooks and suspended the teaching of recent National History in public schools (what later appeared to be) the next fifteen years, on the ground that the previous Hutu-centered the teaching material had been biased and divisive and contributed to the hate propaganda accompanying the genocide. No approach was deemed acceptable to teach the genocide and massacres of preceding decades. Those calling the 1959 Massacre... were associated with a Hutu version of history; those calling it ‘the first genocide against the Tutsi,’ with a Tutsi version of history. Most history teachers were reluctant to teach such sensitive historical issues without guidelines or materials, although several commissions and reports made proposals to that effect”.⁹¹

The ideology underpinning Rwandan society went from one extreme to another. For the first time since the 1500s, there was purportedly no systemic advantage or disadvantage to being of a certain heritage in Rwanda.

There is an intense dispute among historians as to whether the current approach will maintain long-term peace in Rwanda or whether it is another form of extremism that will end up having a detrimental impact on the people of Rwanda. The new narratives, which focus on an all-encompassing national identity or “Rwandanness,” serve to unify the people, and Rwanda is currently in a period of relative peace and economic prosperity. However, it is impossible to attribute that entirely to the way the country currently handles identity politics because many other factors are in play, such as modernization. Additionally, the party in power is unopposed, so the true will of the people is not entirely clear.

Just as victors write history, victors have the power to define identity in the society they rule. When leaders weaponize identity, it can help them retain power, but it creates an “us versus them” ideology within a society, and at its most extreme, that can result in genocide. The cost of weaponizing identity can be catastrophic. The fight to define who was authentically Rwandan went on for hundreds of years, creating cycles of vengeance, and has had long-term costs that present-day

⁹¹ Antoon De Baets, “Post-Conflict History Education Moratoria: A Balance,” *World Studies in Education* 16, no. 1 (January 1, 2015): 14, <https://doi.org/10.7459/wse/16.1.02>.

Rwandans must navigate today. As a result of the weaponization of identity, cycles of vengeance, and genocide, Rwandans have experienced significant collective trauma, which has led to a modern-day Rwandan society with an intense fear of ethnic divisions that influences policy at all levels. While the more common, colonized narrative places blame exclusively on the European colonists, which ignores hundreds of years of pre-colonial Rwandan history.⁹² In reality, Tutsi and Hutu were meaningful identities that existed long before colonialism and had been weaponized by the people of Rwanda before the colonists arrived. The colonists can be credited with further institutionalizing divisiveness and providing resources to increase the imbalance of power in the region, but they cannot be blamed for inventing the identities or the conflict. When historians examine Rwandan history, they ask how so many people could participate in such extreme violence. An examination of the weaponization of identity brings us closer to answering this essential question.

⁹² Sarah Warshauer Freedman et al., “Teaching History after Identity-Based Conflicts: The Rwanda Experience,” *Comparative Education Review* 52, no. 4 (November 2008): 14, <https://doi.org/10.1086/591302>.

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