

Colonial Roots of the Rwandese Ethnic Conflict

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ABSTRACT: The 1994 Rwanda Genocide apart from being a major humanitarian travesty also poses some very interesting questions to a social scientist. It is one of the very few if not the only case where an entire community carried out a planned extermination of another. This was in marked contrast to the Jewish Holocaust, the primary responsibility of which lay with the Nazi Party and its anti-Semitic doctrine, and many Germans were even unaware of the former. In Rwanda, the genocide was carried out by almost the entire Hutu Community against the Tutsi, and is a living example of the dangers of a polarised society. However, the roots of the genocide were laid early in Rwanda's colonial past; the polarised Rwandese society was a direct product of the policies followed by the colonial regime. The Catholic Church also played an important role in creating artificial divisions in Rwandese society. It would thus be useful to study the roles of the various colonial institutions in creating the ethnic divide in Rwanda.

Keywords: Colonial, Rwanda, Ethnic, Conflict

I. Introduction

In 1994, Rwanda erupted into one of the most appalling cases of mass murder the world has witnessed since World War II. Many of the majority Hutu (about 8 per cent of the population) turned on the Tutsi (about 12 per cent of the population) and moderate Hutu, killing an estimated total of 800,000 people. It would therefore be useful to study the deep roots of the ethnic differences causing the genocide. The causes themselves were greatly exacerbated by short sighted colonial policies under Belgian rule, the latter being inextricably intertwined with the artificial notions of ethnic and racial differences which so plague the region today.

II. Topography And Demography

Rwanda covers an area of 26,338 sq. km, that is roughly two-thirds the size of Switzerland. In spite of its limited size, it is characterised by a great variety of bioclimatic regions which have led to different ethnic occupations in past history. Central Rwanda, like other regions where agriculture is sustainable, was occupied by Hutu kingdoms. Over the years, sedentary agriculture led to savanization from a region which was originally tropical jungle, and created an important pastoral resource base in addition to agriculture resources. Under these conditions, pastoralism was more productive than in drier eastern woodland savanna.

In the east, there is a woodland savanna which is a western part of a similar but more extensive life zone in which hermitic pastoralist groups have traditionally carried out their activities. The Tutsi of Rwanda moved their herds westwards until they settled in Buganza around Lake Muhazi where the Nyiginya dynasty that ruled over enlarged Rwanda until 1959 was founded. With this setting, there was a geographical specialisation as far as use of natural resources was concerned. But with cattle overpopulation, some pastoralist groups moved peacefully westwards for more space for their herds. At each stage, the point of settlement was determined by availability of pasture resources. There was no comparable movement of Hutu farmers. It was taking place over shorter distances, because in their case migrants were keeping as short as possible the social distance from their group. With this colonising pattern, there was a convergence of two different types of land resource use in the same ecological environment, and this had to be the socio-ecological background of ethnic relations in the last centuries.

Most of its Hutu and Tutsi populations, had to depend on the same land resources for their livelihood, thanks to territorial de-specialisation as far as agriculture or cattle productions were concerned. This contradiction, enhanced by an ideology emphasising supremacy of pastoralism, shaped the political system that governed the country until 1959, and that still influences present day Rwandan politics. Contradictory demands over land resource use due to production de-specialisation had to be resolved not through social negotiations, but through skillful matching of ethno-professional and ethno-political specialisation. Cattle herders in Eastern Rwanda, organised under the rule of the Nyiginya dynasty by the 15th century, who ceased to move westward by peaceful means. They used war to increase the resource base for their herds, and cattle to forge social and political ties, but not social harmony. Construction of Rwanda as a nation resulted from construction of Tutsi monopoly over control of natural resources and gradual reduction of Hutu access to

them. It was obviously not efficient for Tutsi monarchs to invest too much in the conquest and effective occupation of territories to create a monopoly of territory that did not have a high bovine production potential.

III. European Pseudo-Scientific Theories

From 1894 until the end of World War I, Rwanda, along with Burundi and present-day Tanzania, was part of German East Africa. Belgium claimed it thereafter, becoming the administering authority from 1924 to 1962. During their colonial tenure, the Germans and Belgians ruled Rwanda indirectly through Tutsi monarchs and their chiefs. The colonialists developed the so-called Hamitic hypothesis or myth, which held that the Tutsi and everything humanly ‘superior’ (by European definition) in Central Africa came from ancient Egypt or Abyssinia.

The Tutsi, a numerical minority, but socially dominant community of cattle herders in the region comprising Rwanda, Uganda and eastern Congo were considered by Europeans to belong to the Hamitic group of tribes thought to have descended from Ham, a mythological figure from Biblical traditions; therefore a sort of explanation was thus made for their dominance on account of them having descended from a common source as the ‘enlightened’ white races of Europe, though obviously being far lower in hierarchy than the whites, as Ham was cursed by Noah, and the curse fell upon his son Canaan. However, today it is commonly accepted that this interpretation of the Book of Genesis is inaccurate as the race or colour of Ham is never mentioned, but was nevertheless used to justify slavery and racism throughout the 17th and 18th centuries. The non-dominant communities of the region, though forming a majority were not even distantly related to Biblical traditions, considered to describe the origins of all mankind and thus considered as sub-human and they could be commercially exploited as animals. The Europeans regarded Hutu and Twa, physically shorter as of a racially inferior stock to the Tutsi. Sixty years of such prejudicial fabrications inflated Tutsi egos inordinately and crushed Hutu feelings, which coalesced into an aggressively resentful inferiority complex.

One another much-disputed historical ‘fact’ is the migration theory of the origins of the Batutsi, Bahutu and Batwa (In the local ‘Kinyarwanda’ language, the prefix ‘Ba’ is used to denote the plural of a word. Therefore, the plural for Tutsi, Hutu or Twa, will be Batutsi, Bahutu or Batwa respectively; the plural is also used to refer to the entire ethnic group). According to early German accounts, the tall Batutsi monarchs were supposed to have descended from Bahima invaders who came from Ethiopia, or the Middle East, and to have set up relations of dominance over the indigenous Bantu Bahutu farmers and the Batwa hunter-gatherers. The immigration of Batutsi was thought to have taken place in the twelfth or thirteenth century. According to this historiography, the Batutsi of Rwanda and Burundi (as well as other groups seen as racially related) are not really indigenous Africans at all, as are the ‘Bantu’ Hutu and ‘pygmy’ Twa. In 1865, the Nile explorer John Hanning Speke first sought to demonstrate the superiority of the ‘noble, aristocratic’ kingships of the inter-lacustrine (region between the Great Lakes region of Africa) zone over the Bantu peoples around them, over whom they generally ruled.

Later missionaries and adventurers continued to concoct fantastical theories of the origins of the Batutsi, also known as ‘Hamites’, descended from the cursed son of Noah. There were gross exaggerations of the physical disparity in size between Bahutu and the taller Batutsi, with the aristocratic minority invariably being compared with the majority of farmers and servants. The still partly hunter-gatherer Batwa minority group, composing just 1 per cent of the population, completed the racialised image of a society stratified in terms of status, occupation, physiology, and supposedly in terms of origin as well. Alternatives to the Hamitic migration theories have been proposed to explain the observable (but often greatly exaggerated) physical differences between the three social groups composing Rwandan society. Walter Rodney, for example, stressed that dietary differences might play a part in creating differences in stature between the aristocracy and the peasantry. Such differences might also reflect the polarisation of a previously fluid and mixed society into a more sharply hierarchical and caste-based set of social structures.

The Belgians rule began in 1919 under the League of Nation’s Mandate system. The early years of Belgian rule were relatively indirect or non intrusive. It was only from 1926 onwards that colonial administration became more intrusive into Rwandese society. Between 1926 and 1931, the administration undertook several measures which were to severely alter the relationship between the different indigenous communities. The Belgian policies were greatly influenced in a 1927 letter to the Belgian government by Bishop Classe:

“The greatest mistake this government could make would be to suppress the Mututsi caste. Such a revolution would lead the country directly to anarchy and to hateful anti-European communism... We will have no better, more active and more intelligent chiefs than the Batutsi. They are the ones best suited to understand progress..... The government must work with them.”

Thus, by the end of Belgian rule in 1959, 43 out of 45 chiefs and 549 out of 559 sub chiefs were Tutsi. The preferential treatment meted out to the Tutsi with Belgian support allowed the former to modify existing land control rights. The land, no longer recognised as undivided usufruct tracts by lineage groups belonging to collectivity, were considered vacant and the state took the right to dispose of them as they saw fit with little compensation.

Thus, the primarily Tutsi state, gained control of the traditional landholdings including the primarily Hutu regions of northwest and southwest Rwanda, that had remained to some degree separate principalities. Grazing lands were privatised under the new system. The altered the long standing practice of *ubuhake* contracts; under the *ubuhake* system, the Tutsi would lend their cattle for use by the Hutu farmers who would pay the debt by personal or military service to the Tutsi chiefs.

The *ubuhake* system had been around since the 15th century and had continued with some minor modifications under colonial rule; it was a major source of irritation between the Hutu and Tutsi communities, and was the basis of the communal hostility during the 1959 revolution. It was also an example of how colonial policies forced their ideology of western capitalism characterised by individualism and privatisation on an indigenous society where it was completely alien. During colonial rule, the church, schools, administration and the army were organised around the assumed racial superiority of the Batutsi. The notion of inherited and immutable inter-racial difference in ability and make-up bolstered what was seen as a pre-colonial 'premise of inequality', on which inter-lacustrine aristocracies had long based their claims to legitimacy. European religious and racial value systems thus came to be superimposed on earlier divine interpretations of the earthly social order. The idea of race lent spurious scientific credence to the idea that Hutu and Tutsi identities arose from separate sources, rather than being part of a single social system of class, status and occupation. In the 1920s, the triple offices of land, cattle and army overlord were combined into a single position, which became confined to Batutsi alone.

IV. Role Of The Catholic Church

Such a shift changed the socio-economic nature of traditional Rwandese society. The colonial government further interfered in the traditional social setup by removing King Yuhi V Musinga and replacing him with his son Mutara III Rudahigwa in 1931 as the latter was willing to convert to Christianity. Growing numbers of Tutsi thus, joined the Church and its mission to rid Rwanda of 'pagan' policies and practices such as polygamy and adultery. This also ended any motivations for the Belgians to promote any Hutu to ruling positions - this was a problem for a time when few Tutsi had been unwilling to convert to Christianity. In fact the clergy was extremely obsessed with creating an elite ruling group. In 1912, the white fathers decided to move the missionary school in the capital, Nyanza close to the capital Kabyagi which also served as the capital of the Vicarite; it was felt that too many Bahutu were being recruited:

"We will take advantage of those circumstances to create a school for the Batutsi at Kabyagi. There, we will really have the children of the chiefs whom we surely know; otherwise at the capital, it is more or less a bunch of doubtful origin, mostly the Bahutu."

This was inspite of the fact that there were enough examples of inter marriage between Bahutu and Batutsi even in the royal family.

"The author of the previous quotation was unaware that even the son of the king who was just born [Rudahigwa born in 1911 became king in 1931] had for a grandmother, a girl of the common people, Nyiranteko. The latter was from a Bahutu background."

Thus it is clear that the Catholic Church played a major role in creating artificial constructs in the

Rwandese society in keeping with the underlying philosophy of the Hamitic Hypothesis. For the Hutu to stand a chance at education, a theology education seemed to be the only chance. Their lack of formal education reduced their chances of employment in government. However, as the Hutu ranks swelled the ranks of the church there was a growing discomfort among the white clerics whose attitude switched from supporting Tutsi to the Hutu who comprised the majority of the men of the cloth.

During the 1933-34 census the Belgians decided on a system of ethnic identity cards that indicated the Tutsi, Hutu, or Twa "ethnicity" of each person. The identity card "ethnicity" of future generations was determined patrilineally; all persons were designated as having the "ethnicity" of their fathers, regardless of the "ethnicity" of their mothers. When identity cards were introduced in 1933, this created problems, since it was impossible to know for sure who belonged to which 'racial' group. Belgian colonial administrators so despaired of being able to distinguish Batutsi from Bahutu, that they introduced a means-based system of ethnic identification. Any man with more than ten head of cattle was to be permanently classified as Tutsi, and any man with fewer than ten cattle as Hutu or Twa, depending on their profession.

V. Conclusion

Close to independence from Belgian rule in 1962, Hutu leaders from the Party of the Hutu Emancipation Movement (PARMEHUTU) released the "Hutu Manifesto" of 1957, in which Hutu leaders referred to the identity card categories as "races," thereby indicating that such designations had become fixed in their psyche. This was despite the fact that Hutu and Tutsi spoke the same language and practiced similar religions and intermarried. The practice of ethnic identity cards which was carried on until its abolition by the 1994 post-genocide government, had the unfortunate consequence of firmly attaching a sub-national identity to all Rwandans and thereby rigidly dividing them into categories, which, for many people, carried a negative history of dominance-subordination, superiority-inferiority, and exploitation-suffering. It is therefore clear that the groundwork for the 1994 genocide had already been laid down by the racist policies of the Belgian colonial administration at the turn of the Century and that such policies were in turn based upon pseudo-scientific ideas heavily influenced by religion.

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