

*Review*

# The post genocide reconciliation in Rwanda: Erasing ethnicity and building citizenship

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**The Rwandan genocide, seen as the result of years of ethnic antagonization and segmentation, was followed by a political effort leading to the restructuration of Rwandan national identity in order to unify the society and eventually achieve national reconciliation. By implementing measures such as the removal of ethnic affiliation on national identity documents, or by reforming the national education curriculum, the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RFP), governing the country since 1994 under the leadership of the President Paul Kagame, aimed at the progressive obliteration of the ethnic frame of references in the Rwandan society. Therefore, the aim of this study is to analyze the dynamics of obliteration of the ethnic factor in the Rwandan state narrative and to study, under a multidimensional lens, the post-genocide nation-building processes.**

**Key words:** Ethnicity, ethnic denialism, genocide, nation building, civic transition.

## INTRODUCTION

The study of the causes of the 1994 Rwandan genocide, that led to between 800000 and a million victims, has been subjected to a memory war, a conflict between opposed interpretations of historical events and dynamics.

This memory war not only tackles the immediate causes of the genocide, it is to say the death of the Hutu president Habyarimana in 1994, but also the more profound sources of ethnic segmentation in Rwanda and Burundi. Hence, a veritable conflict opposes the proponents of the constructivist thesis, imputing the responsibility of ethnic segmentation to the colonizing powers such as Belgium and Germany, and the proponents of the primordialist approach, recognizing the authenticity of ethnic construct in Rwanda using the Hamitic hypotheses. The exacerbation of the constructivist thesis is epitomized by the post-genocide

Rwandan state that became a champion of ethnic denial emphasizing the colonial impact on ethnic segmentation and its absence prior to colonialism.

The Hamitic thesis were based on a primordial approach of ethnicity linked to what Kaplan (2005) calls the Ancient Hatreds, describing the identities as fixed and becoming a basis for political mobilization. Hamitic hypotheses rely on the affirmation of biological differences between ethnic groups and the highlighting of physical distinctions stemming from different genealogical lines. This conception of ethnicity places the ethnic lines as nodal points of the individuals lives and this will be the case particularly after the independence of Rwanda in 1961. Indeed, Tilly (2002) differentiated between the detached identities, which are the identities that are not experienced on a daily basis and the embedded identities,

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the identities invoked in daily practices. The task of the post-genocide RFP government would be hence to transform the embedded ethnic identities into detached identities, which is the first step for their complete annihilation as they will progressively be replaced by nation state related identities.

Ethnic identity is a matter of self-description and of ascription, highlighting the individual and collective dynamics in its constitution and the evolving assignation of identity. Hence, in the case of Rwanda, it is clear that ethnic ascription played an important role since the colonial powers interfered in the ethnic segmentation. According to Newbury (1998), the colonial powers misinterpreted the ethnic composition of Rwanda by considering the social segmentation as an ethnic segmentation and overemphasized on the ethnic division of the social importance of these divisions. As described by Newbury (1988), the European colonial powers had an image of Rwanda (and Burundi) as having a marked social hierarchy accompanied by an “extraordinary political centralization”. The great part of the first European descriptions of Rwanda comprised an emphasis on the ethnic duality, with the light skinned and tall Tutsi, associated with power and pastoralism, in contrast to the more dark-skinned Hutu, associated with servitude. However, as underlined by Newbury (1988) this vision contrasts with the reality of ethnic identities that were not primordial but were contextually created.

Hence, according to historian King (2013), the post-genocide Rwandan Patriotic Front (FPR) state will propel a theory of the precolonial golden age in which ethnic conflicts were absent. This theory of precolonial golden age was reinforced by the work of scholars such as Christian (2010) that highlighted the peculiarity of ethnicity of Rwanda since patrilinear and hereditary identifications do not correspond with a linguistic, cultural or geographic differentiation. Additionally, Christian (2010) defined the ethnic categories as social categories, with the Tutsi being the wealthier and powerful in contrast to the Hutu. In this view, the social upgrading and downgrading is possible, meaning an intercommunication between the different social classes.

#### **HENCE, WHAT ARE THE MAIN CHALLENGES RWANDA FACES IN ITS TRANSITION FROM AN ETHNIC-BASED SOCIETY TO A CIVIC-CITIZENSHIP SOCIETY?**

By answering this research question, the aim of this paper was to deconstruct the nation building strategy of the post-genocide Rwanda led by Paul Kagame and the FPR regime. Moreover, the methodology of the research was multidisciplinary, as it connected different disciplines to offer a broader and more complete overview of the situation, incorporating elements from economy, sociology and historiography in the observation of the Rwandan

case. In addition, there was an attempt to relativize the success of the outcomes of this policy by applying a methodological critique particularly directed towards the authoritarian power of Kagame.

Most of the literature evoking the Rwandan case emphasizes the genocide shift and the construction of a civic identity disconnected from ethnic belonging, notably with a comparison with Burundi that has adopted ethnic accommodation measures. However, most of these works adopted a unidimensional socio-political approach, without examining the historiographical and educational features. Moreover, there is a lack of literature connecting nation-building to economic performances or underlining economic success as an incentive for collective unification. In this research, the goal was to connect historiography, political sociology, economy and social psychology to reveal trends inherent to nation-building, collective trauma, collective motivation by economic incentives or paternalistic politics crisscrossing and forming the peculiarity of the Rwandan case.

#### **A STATE LED AND TOP-DOWN PROCESS OF NATION-BUILDING**

The post-genocide Rwanda is an authoritarian state. As defined by Linz (1975) authoritarianism is a regime of limited pluralism, which, in contrast to totalitarian regimes, will not have the aims of homogenizing the population under a single political project and will tolerate a limited opposition that will not pose a threat to the authoritarian grasp on power. The president Paul Kagame is in power since 1994 and has since then progressively consolidated its rule by developing a repressive state apparatus that is constituted by an array of coercive and limitative elements such as prison, a corrupted judiciary system targeting political opponents and the omnipotence of the Kagame affiliated elite on the political life.

Indeed, the regime developed ideological state apparatuses which are according to Althusser (1965) intangible ideological assets vehiculated by medias, school or culture. The ideological state apparatus of the Rwandan regime will notably be based on a conditioning of the population through the transmission of state-controlled ideals such as nation, ethnic denialism and genocide consciousness. The Rwandan case is significant in its propension to show the dynamics of nation-building in a deeply divided society, and it might be relevant to compare this case to Gellner's (1983) constructivist analysis of nationalism, highlighting the anteriority of nationalism over the nation. Therefore, in the Rwandan case, the government will propel a state-led process of construction of nationalism around the idea of "Rwandanness" which was not pre-existent to the state, as political unit to enable the construction of an inclusive national idea. Kagame and FPR regime will then have a discourse based on the artificiality and constructed nature

of the ethnic divisions in Rwanda.

Hence, post-genocide Rwanda will follow a trajectory that was described by Hobsbawm (1992) as the transition from a vertical top-down domination to a horizontal solidarity based on civil religion and citizenship. The preamble of the 2003 Rwandan constitution is archetypal of this trajectory as it mentions that Rwandans “enjoy the privilege of having one country, a common language, a common culture and a long-shared history which ought to lead to a common vision of our destiny.” The state based its reconstruction policy on the annihilation of ethnicity, and according to Vandeginste (2014), contrarily to Burundi, Rwanda did not develop a consociational Lijphartian state based on the accommodation of ethnic differences, but a state based on an integrationist policy, it is to say a policy obliterating ethnicity as a source of political mobilization. Indeed, in Burundi, the ethnicity is a central factor of political mobilization and is mentioned for every electoral candidate. In contrast, in Rwanda, the chosen amnesia of ethnicity will be reinforced by the kind of centripetal power-sharing arrangements that are not ethnic-related but are based on proportionality, quotas, and coalitions trying to bridge ideological and not ethnic gaps.

Therefore, the efforts of the state will be to reposition the political competition on the ideological field and not ethnic field. Moreover, according to Vandeginste (2014), Rwanda’s political system is based on the importance given to power mitigation and consensus as for instance, even majoritarian parties cannot claim more than 50% of the seats and the president and the speaker of the parliament must not pertain to the same party.

### **HIJACKING NARRATIVES AND MEMORY: EXAMINING THE COLONIAL IMPACT AND FOSTERING ETHNIC AMNESIA**

Cooper (1996) highlighted the processes of nation-building subsequently to colonization, talking about national movements that were not constructed on a horizontal affinity corresponding to a certain imagined community as described by Anderson (1983), but constructed on vertical ties, on patron to client ties showing the exacerbation of the ethnic segmentation. Moreover, Cooper (1996) underlined the weakness of post-colonial states, struggling to achieve a nation-state unity. Therefore, the absence of nation-state unifying the citizens under a unique identity will lead to a growing importance of concurrent status identities (Berman B, Dickson E, Will Kymlicka, 2004) This post-colonial development will lead to what Ekeh (1975) calls the “two publics in Africa”, meaning that the public realm will be divided in a realm influenced by primordial and ethnic groupings, and of an amoral civic public realm that will therefore be deprived from the moral imperatives characterizing the first realm. This process will hence curb the attempts to achieve a unified citizenship as the same political actors

are simultaneously operating in the primordial and in the civic publics.

As underlined by Vidal (2004), the Rwandan state will stage a work of collective mourning embedded in a larger process of memorization of the genocide epitomized by the ritualized public commemorations. The state narrative has hierarchized the victims in a selective manner, with the Tutsi victims being the central victims of the genocide, then moderate Hutus, and finally collateral victims of the post-genocide war. Hence, according to Vidal (2004), there was a criticism of the regime politics as being a form of political recuperation and instrumentalization of the disaster. This trend was epitomized significantly by the exhibition of the genocide’s victims’ cadavers beginning from 1996, which was contrary to the Rwandan funerary traditions. Vidal (2004) talks also about a forced memorization (Macron, 2000) and the constitution of an official history of the genocide, which was used in order to build a community and to propel the bases of a unification of the nation. Indeed, according to Renan (1887), a nation is based on a common and collective understanding of the past, the history of the country is selectively appropriated by the nationalist project.

Moreover, according to Korman (2014) there have been undoubtedly a memory competition since the victory of the FPR was also concomitant with the end of the genocide. Hence, the first years of FPR rule were characterized by this coincidence between a solemnity linked to the genocide loss but also a certain euphoria because of the triumphant victory of the FPR that progressively depicted itself as the savior of a lost country. The legitimation of the FPR and of Kagame rule is hence still embedded in this logic of providential action, which can be compared to a charismatic legitimacy as described by Weber (1968), since it is based on the heroic actions of an individual and of their personal authority.

### **UNITY THROUGH AUTHORITARIAN MEANS: A PARADOXICAL PROCESS?**

According to Mamdani (2004), the independence of previously colonized countries should be the birth of a deracialized state. In Rwanda, the formal independence in 1962 did not lead to the un-ethnicization of political and social relationships, which lead to the progressive representation of 1994 as the real independence year of Rwanda. The Kagame narrative represents 1994 as a national liberation, as the year 0 of the Rwandan state, as a *Sattelzeit* (Koselleck, 1997), a bridging period in which discontinuity coincides with transition.

The new departure of the Rwandan nation can be exemplified by the organic law of the genocide, limiting the judicial suing to crimes that happened between October 1990 and December 1994. This temporal limitation is constraining the potential extrapolations of

the judicial system that was already overwhelmed in 1994. Moreover, by limiting the temporal frame of the crimes, the regime made it easier to close the genocide hunt and to subsequently outsource the condemnation process to popular courts, the gaccacas, favoring a grassroots conception of national reconciliation. Moreover, another way to create a unificatory citizenship is to shed light not on the genocide, but on the FPR victory. Hence, the quintessential archetype of this trend is the choice of the venue of the first commemoration of the genocide, the 7th of April 1995, in Rebero which was the place not of Tutsi massacres, but of the military victory of the FPR after intense fights in 1994.

However, can the authoritarian means of the integrationist nation building be conciliated with the authoritarian means of its practical application?

The authoritarian means by which the post-genocide state led to the unification of the state were linked to the urgency of the constitution of a unified nation in a deeply divided society. Therefore, the depth and the strength of the ethnic segmentation of society could only be countered by an authoritarian takeover for the greater good. The ethnic segmentation of Rwanda was even more complex and embedded in the mentalities since the dialectical enmity relationship of the two main ethnic groups, Hutu and Tutsi, was influencing the identity conception of each group. In this case, it is worth mentioning the theory of "looking glass self-effect", as underlined by Cooley (1967) and by which a group is self-defined through the image another group has of it.

Hence, the Kagame regime can be considered as a Paternalistic regime, that is according to Kant and Proust (1784) a regime mimicking the behaviors and features of a familial structure and in which the leader is compared to the father of the nation. Paul Kagame is seen as the father of the Rwandan nation; his decisions are presented as incontestable since he is presented as having an unlimited knowledge of the needs of the population and of the decisions he must take to enable the development of Rwanda. Consequently, the Rwandan regime is a paternalistic regime in which the leader incarnated the nation, with Incarnation being opposed to Representation, which can be described to Schmidt's (1938) typology of political processes. The incarnation of the Rwandan population by Kagame makes it possible to take unilateral decisions in the name of the society without necessarily consulting it.

## **THE ECONOMIC GROWTH AND THE RWANDAN RENAISSANCE AS UNIFYING**

The main example of this paternalistic trend is without any doubt the state leadership on the economic spheres, with a developmentalist approach reflecting a monopoly of the state on the economic guidelines.

The Rwandan state's proactivity in terms of economic planning and reform can be compared to a form of

Shapership. This notion as developed by Frankfort and Baudoin (2019) describes the ability of a leader to shape future projects and a new organization of the society. President Kagame started a form of Shapership subsequently to the genocide to draw strategies to develop Rwanda. The ambitions of the Kagame Shapership can be aligned to the notion of a manifest national destiny. Renan (1887) in "what is a nation?" describes the logics of the unification of a nation after a shared misfortune and subsequently its unification around a prophesized and expected better future. Renan (1887) even describes the shared woe as a stronger unifier for the nation than a shared joy. Hence, as described by Amougou (2019), the Rwandan nation has been unified by a collective misfortune epitomized by the genocide but also by the perspective of collective fortune symbolized by the FPR efforts to develop the nation.

The construction of idealized future perspectives is epitomized by the economic growth seen as the Rwandan renaissance. The incredible progresses of Rwanda in terms of economic performance led to the term "Rwandan economic miracle", represented notably by the 7.5% of average annual growth the last 10 years (from 2008 to 2018, World Bank). Moreover, the economic success of Rwanda is depicted as transgressing ethnic categories and can foster a sense of commonality since the interests of the population in the economic renaissance are shared. Furthermore, because of this economic success, considering the recent performances as the "Rwandan economic miracle", Kagame started benefiting from a legal rational legitimacy, that is according to Weber (1922) emanating from the rational strategies of the regime favouring economic development, bureaucratic structuration and respect of private property laws. Hence, there is a shift from a charismatic leadership to a legal rational leadership that is at the same time internal and external, since the Kagame regime benefits from a great support from international organizations such as the World Monetary Fund or the World Bank.

In addition, the developmentalist approach of the Rwandan economic projects is based on the centrality of education to achieve the growth goals. The objectives of the regime are to foster a new generation of Rwandans conscious of their national identity and of their responsibility in forging the Rwanda of tomorrow and these efforts were constituted through education, with history and civic education course. The youth of the Rwandan population, with an average age of 20 years, is a regularly underlined element, since 60% of the population was born after the genocide.

## **A TOP-DOWN NATIONAL IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION?**

Notable are the progresses that Rwanda has made in terms of national unity and economic development, however the strategy of the President Kagame regime can be qualified as inherently paternalistic. Since 1994,

the regime started to implement policies corresponding to its own vision and project of the society. It is clear that in this case, the contribution of the civil society and population in the decisions was minimal, which will make that the population will undergo the decisions rather than participate in the elaboration of the nation state ideals. Hence, because of this top-down policy, the internalization of the national citizenship ideas may be inferior to the one using a greater participation of the population in its elaboration and implementation.

Furthermore, according to McCrudden and O'Leary (2013), the ethnic amnesia integrationist citizenship model is sometimes only a figurehead for a secularized version of the dominating ethnic group's rule. Therefore, under the guise of the disappearing of ethnic segmentation, the Rwandan political model could be a regime of Tutsi FPR omnipotence, with Paul Kagame being the recipient of power. Therefore, even if many efforts were made in order to promote consensus and power mitigation in the elected offices, it could be a cosmetic façade. Indeed, Rwanda is often described as an authoritarian rule in which the president, Paul Kagame, has an overwhelming power limiting the role of the elected individuals. Consequently, the perceived power accommodation and centripetal conception of the Rwandan political regime is not the reality as the power is in fact accumulated by a small circle of people, including the president, Paul Kagame. Amnesty International repeatedly criticized the Kagame regime for its use of the anti-genocide laws against potential political opponents.

In addition, on another level, there is an apparent disconnection between the FPR elite and the population since according to Reyntjens (2013), the FPR elite emanates mainly from the urban circles, from the capital Kigali and from the diaspora, the president Kagame himself was living in Belgium until 1994. Hence, this elite may not have a knowledge of the practical and deep impact of ethnicity on the non-urban population and will apply a kind of wishful thinking abolishing ethnicity without fathoming its persisting importance.

## **ETHNIC DENIALISM VERSUS ETHNIC PERSISTENCE**

Recognizing the constructed nature of the ethnic group and denying ethnic divisions is sometimes criticized as it forgets that ethnicity had major impacts on the lives of Rwandans and still has some reverberations as the genocide may have provoked an increased Tutsi solidarity and consciousness. The desire to operate a tabula rasa of the past as epitomized by the absence of mentions to ethnic groups in the 2003 Constitution is hence difficult and shows a lack of knowledge of the Rwandan society.

According to King (2014), obliterating ethnic groups is contrary to the reality of the country in which ethnicity is still a structuring element of the social life of individuals. The state efforts will be hence to project an image of

Rwanda with a unified civic identity and with geographical cultural differences but with a weakening and progressive obliteration of the importance of the ethnic frame of reference in social, political and economic life. As underlined by Wielenga (2014) resistance to the state project of unification of Rwandans will be to speak in ethnic terms, that is, stereotyping and othering, as epitomized by the labelling by some Rwandans of the politician Frank Habineza as a "mountain gorilla", referring to his Hutu origins.

Furthermore, according to Chrétien (2018), the whole process of ethnic strengthening in Rwanda, from the colonization to 1994 was based on historical, religious, feudal and colonial discourses that contributed to give to the Hutu Tutsi duality an apparent historicity. The mechanisms of historicization of the ethnic divide can be compared to the process of Invention of Tradition, as described by Ranger and Hobsbawm (1992), giving historical legitimization to newly established dynamics.

Therefore, the Rwandan state is placing itself in a position of ethnic denialism and consequently, as it denies the persistence of ethnicity in the society, it cannot fight against the facets of ethnic enmity that still impact the lives of Rwanda. According to Ange Muyazaki<sup>1</sup>, a genocide survivor, there is still an inter-ethnic enmity in Rwanda that could not be tackled because of the position of ethnic denialism of the state.

Moreover, the logical hierarchy of victims establishing the Tutsi as the primary victims of the genocide is contested in Rwanda. As seen by Vidal (2004), the first national union government, gathering members from different ethnic groups, split in August 1995 because of the departure of many Hutu ministers, such as the Prime Minister Faustin Twagiramungu, because of the inherent tensions linked to the memorization and to the taboos linked to the Hutu victims' status. Even after the October 2000 National summit on Unity and Reconciliation, this issue of the right of mourning was not solved. According to Korman (2014), the expression *Itsembabwoko n'itsembatsemba* meaning genocide and massacres is directly and primarily linked to the Tutsi massacres that are the only ones having the naming of Genocide. Fidèle Ndayisaba, executive secretary of the Unity and Reconciliation National Commission (NCUR) said that Hutu families can remember and honor the memory of their dead, but they should not in any case try to compare these deaths to the genocide victims.

## **THE COMPETITIVE VICTIMHOOD AND NEGATIONISM ISSUES**

By establishing a hierarchy of victims of the genocide, some tendencies of competitive victimhood can be noticed, especially used by Hutus that were even tempted to employ a negationist rhetoric.

As explained by Chaumont (2010), competitive victimhood is symptomatic of the Age of Victimhood in which

being a victim is socially gratifying as this status offers new opportunities. According to Andrihetho (2012), the question of the coexistence of 1 Conference of Ange Muyazaki, Sciences Po, May 2019 different social entities with a legacy of "mutual violence, humiliation and abuse" cannot be solved by formal agreements since the persisting feelings of distrust and motivations for revenge could provoke what Nadler (2002) calls an endless cycle of violence. Competitive victimhood in this context is the competitive and escalating claim of concurrent groups to have suffered more than the others which leads to the persistence of enmity between the groups. In the Rwandan case, the Tutsi, claiming to have suffered of the genocide may be countered by some Hutus trying to use a rhetoric paralleling the Tutsi genocide to the FPR killings during the war.

As described by Mugiraneza (2009) after the end of the genocide, the answer of the former killers was to negate and to have a relativist stance on the massacres. Negation is therefore seen as a weapon to avoid the prosecutions but also to negate the status of victim given to the Tutsis and claim it. As underlined by Noor et al. (2008), the status of victim is presented as a provider to a preferential access to valuable resources such as legitimacy and political power, and there is a competition from some actors to attain the victim status. The rise of negationist trends can be seen by some actors as a way to present themselves as the victims of the writing of history and is intertwined with conspiracy theories narrating how the victimization of a group leads to their domination over the society.

The exhibition of the cadavers of the genocide's victims in memorials can be seen as a way to counter the skepticism of the negationists, as they are considered as the proof of the sufferings inflicted in the name of ethnic supremacy. Therefore, the process of memorization of the genocide, notably with the memorial of genocide of Gisozi, will be part of the state array designed to raise awareness of the dangers of ethnic segmentation. The Gisozi's memorial was inspired by the Holocaust memorial model and designed based on a memorial mimicry as many Yad Vashem memorial officials from Jerusalem were solicited in the conception of the memorial. Therefore, the forced memorization of the genocide by the state led to an official history aiming at forging a collective consciousness. This type of official history is according to Rousso and Goldhammer (1991) "dependent upon the expectations of the present".

## CONCLUSION

The research conducted in this article highlighted the fact that the mismatch of reality and state perceptions may lead to the obliteration of challenges that impact the population. The question of ethnic persistence in Rwanda is therefore an important case study showing the transition from a model of ethno-nationalism to a model of

civic nationalism.

Hence, even if the elite's conception of Rwanda doesn't correspond to the reality, the approach of ethnic denialism may contribute to lower the role of ethnicity in the country. Indeed, the approach of Consequentialism, as developed by Berger and Luckman may explain these dynamics since it considers, in the sociological field, that beliefs, even if they are not real, may be real and tangible in their consequences. Therefore, the state conception and implementation of the negation of ethnicity may have impacts even if it doesn't correspond to the real state of society.

Moreover, the efforts of Rwanda will be to project internationally the image of an appeased society without any ethnic referential. The theory of state branding, as developed by Van Ham (2010) could be consistent to analyze how Rwanda is trying currently to create a state image based on the portrayed national reconciliation and on the extraordinary economic renaissance.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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