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Ethnic Twa and Rwandan National Unity and Reconciliation Policy

SUSAN M. THOMSON

My [local official] doesn't understand that my people died because of the events [of 1994] and that I have even more problems that need solutions, since they say peace and unity have been restored.

—A Twa survivor of the 1994 genocide

While it has been well established that ethnic Hutu attempted to exterminate ethnic Tutsi during the genocide in Rwanda, the experience of ethnic Twa in 1994 remains largely unknown and dismissed. The Batwa exist as invisible members of Rwandan society. As the world once again focuses on Rwanda on the fifteenth anniversary of the genocide, the Batwa continue to remain forgotten people in a remembered land. They merely elicit a footnote in scholarship about the genocide, generally formulated in terms of Hutus killing Tutsis and their Hutu sympathizers. Perhaps the deaths of over 10,000 Twa appear insignificant when compared with the slaughter of more than 500,000 Tutsi and politically moderate Hutu. Indeed, readers might be forgiven for thinking that there are only two ethnic groups in Rwanda, because the experiences of Twa are just as peripheral in post-genocide literature as they seem to be in Rwandan social and economic life, both before and after the genocide. Drawing on seven months of ethnographic research and life history interviews with ethnic Twa living in southern Rwanda in 2006, my essay examines the ways that the post-genocide policy of national unity and reconciliation serves to further marginalize an already disadvantaged people.

Since 1994, the government in Rwanda does not recognize ethnic STwa as an indigenous people in need of special protection, although they form Rwanda's most marginal minority. As part of its post-genocide strategy of social reconciliation, the Rwandan government created the policy of "national unity and reconciliation" in 1999.

The policy is designed to promote unity between Tutsi and Hutu, by creating one Rwanda for all Rwandans. This policy also officially rejects ethnic identities that the government believes to be a root cause of the 1994 genocide. Instead of identifying as Hutu, Tutsi, or Twa, individuals are “encouraged” to identify as Rwandan. When new laws against ethnic divisionism were passed in 2001, ethnic self-identification, in fact, became criminal. The fines are severe: prison sentences up to 30 years and fines as high as five million Rwandan francs (US\$8800).

Notwithstanding, the government allows Rwandans to speak about their experiences of the genocide in state-sanctioned settings, such as the neo-traditional *gacaca* courts or the *ingando* (re-education) camps. Yet, the Twa are unable to participate *qua* Twa in these forums, as the policy of national unity and reconciliation does not recognize their lived experiences before, during, or since the genocide. One Twa I interviewed, for example, wanted to attend the *ingando* camp in his community “so that I learn how to live in the new Rwanda.” As he explains, however, his local official said that he was not eligible to attend:

‘You don’t need re-education because you are not part of the genocide. Your people did not kill or get killed.’ I was so angry with him. I lost my mother and sister and I even hid some Tutsi in my home! As soon as he said that [I don’t need re-education], I slammed my fist on the table like this [gestures]. He looked at me and I knew I had done a wrong thing. He called some people and I spent the next week in prison for disrespecting national unity.

According to the official version of Rwandan history, as outlined in the policy of national unity and reconciliation, ultimate blame for the 1994 genocide lies with Rwanda’s colonial powers, who instituted divide-and-rule policies that made all Hutu hate all Tutsi. For peace and security to prevail, the policy asserts that Rwandans of all ethnicities must be taught about the imagined and romanticized ethnic unity that Rwanda enjoyed prior to the arrival of the Europeans, in the hopes of re-establishing it. A careful reading of the pre-colonial, colonial, and pre-genocide literature highlights the deep historical roots of the national unity and reconciliation policy. It has its roots in pre-colonial governance structures and stresses the ethnic unity of Rwandans under Tutsi monarchs, while glossing over any court intrigues or the myriad ways that colonization benefited Tutsi elites at the expense of ordinary Rwandans, Hutu, and Tutsi alike. Twa barely feature in the historical record. Official accounts start with the establishment of the Tutsi monarchy, rather than starting from the

waves of migration that brought the Hutu and then the Tutsi to the territory known today as Rwanda, a territory already inhabited by the forest-dwelling Twa.

While historians have long debated when the Hutu agriculturalists and Tutsi pastoralists first migrated to the region now known as Rwanda, few disagree that the Twa hunter-gatherers were the country's first inhabitants. Today, the Twa constitute less than 1 percent of the population. There are, by most accounts, approximately 30,000 Twa residents in Rwanda today. This number is a very rough estimate, however, because no official data has been collected to document the living conditions of Twa since the genocide. There has been much scholarship about the social construction of Hutu and Tutsi ethnic categories and the ways that colonial powers simplified these ethnic classifications. Twa are only represented in Rwanda's history in their role as entertainers and storytellers to the pre-colonial royal court. Within Rwanda society more broadly, Twa are subject to the disdain of their Hutu and Tutsi neighbors. Both in the past and now, the Twa are socially ostracized as backward and lacking "modern" education. Their traditional songs and dances are scorned. Hutu and Tutsi, elites and ordinary people alike, perceive their Twa neighbors as uncivilized, primitive, and uncultured. Indeed, when I asked Rwandans why they did not consider "former Twa" as their friends, individuals unanimously replied it is because they are filthy and uneducated. The words of one Hutu woman are emblematic, "They are contaminated, and it is best to keep your distance. In fact, there is a proverb that guides us to stay away from them. It says, 'If you shelter from the rain in a Twa hut, then remain there.'"

The official version of history found in the policy of national unity not only expunges the presence of Twa in Rwandan historiography, but it also undermines their standing as an indigenous population in need of special legal protection. In October 2008, the government of Rwanda refused to recognize the existence of the Twa as an indigenous minority group and further refused to honor its international legal obligations under Article 27 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). The government of Rwanda does not deny that the Twa do indeed constitute a minority group under Article 27. It does recognize that the Twa meet all four of the recommended criteria to identify as "indigenous," as put forth by the United Nations Working Group on Indigenous Populations. Instead, the post-genocide government states simply that it does not recognize the rights of special categories of the population given the factors that led to the 1994 genocide. Such an approach not only fails to address the deep-rooted

tensions that remain in Rwandan society since the genocide, but it also effectively erases the Twa, without addressing their historical marginalization and special status with Rwandan society.

Both Hutu and Tutsi were, and remain, racist in their perception of Twa as sub-human and consequently not worthy of equal treatment or status. Even President Paul Kagame, speaking in honor of the fifteenth anniversary of the 1994 genocide, highlighted the marginal position of Twa in Rwanda society when he listed the “unimaginable abuses against the Rwandan people.” His litany of abuses only specified “discriminatory policies against the Tutsi;” nowhere does Kagame acknowledge the persistent and ongoing discrimination against the Twa since pre-colonial times. The post-genocide policy of national unity and reconciliation does little to integrate Twa into the mainstream of Rwandan society. Indeed, quite the opposite. Since 2001, when the ethnic divisionism laws came into force, local organizations working with and for Twa people have had to change their names, as well as their substantive focus, to comply with the new regulations. This puts organizations that work for the rights of Twa people in the difficult position of having to justify their work with a segment of the population that has not been adequately reached by the existing programs and policies of the post-genocide government.

It also makes it difficult for foreign donors to continue to sponsor programs and activities that directly support Twa organizations, as their presence is against the basic premise of the “one Rwanda for all Rwandans” ideal set out in the policy of national unity and reconciliation. Local Rwandan nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) who work to improve the situation of the Twa have faced restriction on their substantive activities and work under the threat that they may be accused of promoting ethnic divisionism, a charge with comes with heavy fines or imprisonment. The government, for example, prevented the international NGO “Minority Rights Group” and its local Rwandan partner organization from holding a workshop on the human rights of Twa women because it was “divisionist” and “contrary to national unity and reconciliation.”

The policy of national unity and reconciliation is an ambitious project that the post-genocide government believes will forge a unified Rwandan identity while fostering reconciliation between survivors of the genocide and its perpetrators. It is, according to the government, a set of mechanisms that “aims to promote unity between Tutsi and Hutu in creating one Rwanda for all Rwandans.” The Twa are conspicuous in their absence from the official narrative of the policy of national unity and reconciliation policy since the government sees them as peripheral to its understanding of how the genocide happened. Indeed,

the policy states clearly that ethnic Tutsi are the sole survivors of the genocide as only they were targeted for death, just as it claims that ethnic Hutu were the sole aggressors. That ethnic Twa died, killed, acted the bystander, or took risks to save lives during the genocide is not acknowledged. Instead, the policy, in attempting to wipe away individual ethnicity in the name of national unity and reconciliation, produces two broad simplifications where all Tutsi (whether they were in Rwanda during the genocide or not) are innocent victims or “survivors,” and all Hutu (whether they participated in the genocide or not) are guilty perpetrators or a segment of the population in need of re-education (on what it means to be “Rwandan”). This is one of the primary weaknesses of the policy as it seeks to homogenize the multiplicity of individual lived experiences of ordinary Rwandans—Hutu, Tutsi, and Twa alike—before, during, and after the genocide.

Instead of representing a sincere attempt to rebuild and reconcile Rwanda, the policy of national unity and reconciliation is best seen as an instrument of state power. The policy relies on two interpretative filters to shape the post-1994 Rwandan political and social order, both of which render ethnic Twa invisible. The first is “history” and the second is “genocide.” Both of these terms work to inhibit multiple representations of the Rwandan conflict. Rather, the policy of national unity and reconciliation serves to legitimate the current, Tutsi-based government’s moral right to rule post-genocide Rwanda. As such, the policy is supported by a historical narrative about Rwanda’s past that shapes the collective memory of the genocide into a narrative that eliminates the real social and economic inequality faced by most ordinary Rwandans under colonial and post-colonial rule. In particular, it reformulates the violence against Tutsi in 1959, 1962, and 1973, as well as during the 1994 genocide, as strictly ethnic in origin, thereby ignoring important class and regional dimensions of those conflicts. Here I do not mean to downplay the magnitude of the genocide, or to relativize pre-1994 pogroms, but rather to point out that the policy of national unity and reconciliation misinterprets historical events to promote certain political ends. Such misinterpretations are likely to promote, given Rwanda’s history of ethnic conflict, the same conditions of social disparity, ethnic inequality, and political repression that it seeks to undo.

The policy of national unity and reconciliation also overlooks that, regardless of ethnic category, most ordinary Rwandans were caught up in the maelstrom of genocidal violence. There are countless stories of survival, of friends and family who took extraordinary risk to protect Tutsi. There are stories of Tutsi who put their own lives on

the line to protect Hutu family and friends from the coercion and intimidation tactics used by the killing squads to goad ordinary Hutu into killing. Notorious killers protected Tutsi they knew personally, ushering them safely through roadblocks, warning them of the whereabouts of marauding groups, and even hiding them at their homes. Some individuals, including ethnic Twa, killed during the day, only to shelter Tutsi friends and relatives at night. Many Tutsi survived because of the aid and succor of a Hutu or Twa family member, friend, colleague, neighbor, or stranger. There are stories about Twa and Hutu who were killed in the genocide because of their typical Tutsi features. Simply stated, the policy of national unity and reconciliation does not acknowledge the lived experiences of the genocide experienced by most Rwandans: Tutsi and Twa perpetrators, Hutu and Twa rescuers; Tutsi, Hutu and Twa resisters; as well as Hutu and Twa survivors. The words of a Twa man who survived the genocide are representative: "It was a difficult time for us all. Some Rwandans have gotten up on our feet and are living again; the government works with them to provide shelter and health care. As a Twa man, it is harder for me because we don't exist in the eyes of the authorities or of our neighbors. We [Twa] are mocked when we suggest that we are also victims of genocide."

In the socioeconomic hierarchy, most Twa find themselves at the bottom rung. Indeed, economic hardship is a daily reality for many Rwandans as 87 percent are subsistence farmers. Few own land and almost none own cattle, and consequently are unable to provide for themselves or their families. Twa that I spoke to exhibited signs of malnutrition, including bloated bellies and orange hair. I regularly saw evidence of starvation; several of my research participants as well as their children exhibited symptoms of *kwashiorkor* and *marasmus* (both forms of malnutrition marked by lack of protein in the diet). Their hands and faces were weathered and gave the appearance of an older age than their biological years. None are thought to maintain a traditional existence as forest dwellers. Most work as potters, although the plastics revolution has reduced demand for their products. Those who are unable to find employment as day laborers or porters often turn to begging. Begging further marginalizes Twa, because in Rwandan culture, begging is for "only those without hope." As one Twa women told me, "It is hard for others to help people like me, even when it is clear we are suffering. Once, a [non-Twa] neighbor reached out to help me with a few sweet potatoes and her husband abused her. He said to her, 'Why do you help that goat [lost soul]? It is not our problem.' He then kicked me and she never spoke to me again."

Twa remain disadvantaged and marginalized in education, health care, and land rights. Since the genocide, the Twa have worse socioeconomic conditions than the national population, which is to say, very poor conditions, since Rwanda's Gini co-efficient increased from 0.47 in 2000 to 0.51 in 2007. The policy of national unity and reconciliation, with its denial of individual ethnic identity, further threatens their already tenuous social position. For example, CAURWA (*Communauté des autochtones rwandais*), the primary civil society organization in Rwanda that represents Twa interests, has not escaped the harassment and intimidation tactics that the post-genocide government employs to ensure that individuals identify as Rwandans. In 2004, for example, the Ministry of Justice ordered CUARWA to change its name to COPORWA (*Communauté des potiers rwandais*), or risk closure on the charge of ethnic divisionism for including the word "indigenous" in its title. This act all but negated the government's recognition of the special status of ethnic Twa in 1999; at the time, it stipulated that the Twa have legitimate grievances because of their historical marginalization within Rwandan society, and that they should benefit from positive discrimination in terms of education and health care.

Integration into mainstream society is difficult at best for a people who are largely dispossessed and at the periphery of Rwandan society. The policy of national unity and reconciliation hardly grants Twa the resources they need to address their endemic marginality. The unwillingness of the government to recognize the Twa as an indigenous population, and the risk that international and local organizations that work with the Twa will be labeled "divisionist," means that few policies or programs exist to protect and promote Twa rights to land and socioeconomic opportunities, as well as their distinct cultural practices. The policy of national unity and reconciliation is a threat to the continued existence of the Twa as an indigenous group. Their right to exist, protected as it is by Article 27 of the ICCPR, needs to be taken seriously by the government, as well as by international donors. First, the government needs to recognize that the indigenous status of the Twa in no way threatens the rights of other Rwandans. Indeed, the government has passed new laws to remedy the historical marginalization of ethnic Tutsi. It could do the same to protect ethnic Twa as both an indigenous and minority group. A Twa representative of COPORWA summed it up best:

The genocide only made worse our efforts to get recognized as culturally distinct. This leaves us more disadvantaged than before [the genocide]. On

top, the government no longer allows us to identify as Twa. One Rwanda for all Rwandans is maybe a good idea for Tutsi and Hutu, but not for us Twa. Even the mountain gorillas get more protection. They after all bring in tourist dollars. We will get rubbed off the face of Rwanda before they do.

RECOMMENDED READINGS

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