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Deborah Mayersen
University of Wollongong, mayersen@uow.edu.au

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'A Political Monopoly Held by One Race': The Politicisation of Ethnicity in Colonial Rwanda

Deborah Mayersen

The University of Queensland

In at least some parts of Rwanda, Hutu and Tutsi subgroups have existed since pre-colonial times. Under German and Belgian colonial rule, the distinction between the Hutu majority and Tutsi minority was perceived as a racial distinction. The Tutsi minority was regarded as racially superior, and given privileged access to education and indigenous positions of authority. Over time, this perception of Tutsi superiority was both institutionalized and internalised within Rwandan society. The 'Hutu Awakening' during the 1950s, however, saw issues surrounding race and privilege become highly politicised. As decolonisation loomed, the intersections between race and power became sites of bitter contestation. The Tutsi elite, long accustomed to their privileged status, sought to retain their hegemony through a rapid transition to independence utilising the existing power structure. The nascent Hutu counter-elite, by contrast, desperately sought access to the organs of power, lest they be 'condemned forever to the role of subordinate manual workers, and this, worse still, after achieving an independence which they will have unwittingly helped to obtain' (Niyonzima and others 1957: 3). Utilising a range of primary documents from the period, including manifestos of political parties, statements of leaders, and documents tabled at the United Nations Trusteeship Council, this paper will analyse the intersection of race and politics during the last decade of colonial rule in Rwanda. The roots of the

ethnic hatred that led to the 1994 genocide can be traced to this period of great ethnic tension.

Introduction

"The most advanced elements among the Bahutu are stirring, and beginning to make overt demands", reported the United Nations (UN) Visiting Mission to the Trust Territory of Rwanda in 1957 (15).¹ Under the auspices of the UN Trusteeship Council, the triennial missions to this Belgian colony had both oversight and advisory functions. The previous mission, in 1954, had declared "There appeared to be very little development of general or even local public opinion" (United Nations 1954: 2) in the country; by 1960, however, the subsequent mission reported on the first major interethnic violence there (United Nations 1960). In a remarkably short period, relations between the Hutu majority and Tutsi minority had become highly politicised, polarised, bitter and violent. Racially motivated violence plagued the country during the independence process. By July 1962, when the country declared independence, some 100,000 Tutsi had fled as refugees (Webster 1966: 84); just eighteen months later ethnic massacres would claim the lives of 10-14,000 Tutsi (Segal 1964: 15; Lemarchand 1970: 225). This chapter will analyse how, and why, issues surrounding ethnicity so quickly became critical during the decolonisation period. It proposes that between 1954 and 1959, when ethnicity emerged as a major political issue in

¹ The UN Trust Territory was officially the Trust Territory of Ruanda-Urundi, but Rwanda and Burundi were administered separately. Statements utilised throughout this paper from Trust Territory documents and reports refer to Rwanda only. For consistency, modern spelling of Rwanda is utilised throughout, however original spelling is retained within direct quotes.

Rwanda, three key factors combined to provoke extreme levels of ethnic polarisation. Together, these explain the high levels of interethnic violence that surrounded Rwanda's birth as a nation.

Background

Rwanda has a long history of ethnic diversity, with the majority Hutu comprising approximately 85 per cent of the population, and the minority Tutsi 15 per cent.² A third group, the Twa, comprise less than 1 per cent. In at least some parts of the country, Hutu and Tutsi subgroups have existed since pre-colonial times. Tutsi were traditionally pastoralists, with a small Tutsi elite comprising the ruling class, while Hutu were traditionally agriculturalists, of generally lower status. The distinction between the Hutu majority and Tutsi minority subgroups has been variously described as one of race, tribe, caste, class, domination and subjugation, ethnicity and political identity. Each descriptor appears to have more than a kernel of truth, but also elements of distortion and inaccuracy. Moreover, the nature of these identities is not a static one, as they have changed over time and in response to both internal and external influences. Whereas today these identities are commonly referred to as ethnic identities (and will be referred to as such within this chapter), for much of Rwanda's history they were considered racial. For most of the period of German (1894-1916) and Belgian (1916-1962) colonial rule, the Tutsi minority was regarded as

² A note on the terminology used in this chapter. Kinyarwanda is a language that uses prefixes extensively, but in conformance with general practice in academic writing on Rwanda, the terms 'Hutu', 'Tutsi' and 'Twa' will be used without prefixes, to denote both singular and plural. In Kinyarwanda the prefix 'mu' denotes singular, and 'ba' plural. Where quotes include these prefixes, they have not been altered.

racially superior, and given privileged access to education and indigenous positions of authority.³ Over time, this perception of Tutsi superiority was both institutionalised and internalised within Rwandan society. Even as late as 1959, Belgium's annual report to the UN on the Trust Territory helpfully included a photo of the Hutu, Tutsi and Twa 'racial types' (*type de race*) (Belgian Government 1959).

Belgium managed the Trust Territory of Rwanda through a system of indirect rule, utilising the indigenous Tutsi elite to implement a range of policies. For the first three decades of its rule, most of these policies were economic and developmental. In the wake of World War Two, however, new challenges arose. The new United Nations mandate advocated rapid political development and preparation for independence in the colony. Triennial Visiting Missions insisted on the first steps towards the democratisation of the indigenous political system. At the same time, a new generation of Catholic missionaries and clergy brought anti-racial and egalitarian values to Rwanda after experiencing the Holocaust in Europe (Mamdani 2001; Linden 1977). Many Hutu children were now receiving a rudimentary education, there were increased opportunities for Hutu in the emerging monetary economy, and through further education in the seminaries. These factors led to the emergence of a Hutu consciousness in the mid-1950s, or what has been dubbed the 'Hutu awakening'. For the first time, race became a

³ Germany was 'allocated' territory that included Rwanda at the Berlin Conference in 1885, but the first German to arrive in the country did not do so until 1894. Belgium occupied Rwanda in 1916 in the course of World War One, the legitimacy of the occupation was confirmed under a League of Nations mandate in 1923.

contested political issue. In just a few short years, Hutu-Tutsi divisions led to the first major outbreak of interethnic violence, the Hutu uprisings of November 1959.

Interethnic Violence

Arguably, three key factors combine to explain the very rapid and extreme polarisation of Hutu-Tutsi divisions, and the resulting interethnic violence. First, the critical nature of this issue to the nascent Hutu counter-elite cannot be underestimated. For this first generation of politically conscious Hutu, race was not one political problem amongst the many challenges that beset Rwanda, but *the* central issue, and the lens through which all other developmental issues were approached. In March 1957 this became apparent with the publication of the *Bahutu Manifesto*. Signed by nine members of the Hutu counter-elite, including future Rwandan president Grégoire Kayibanda, it has been described as “probably the most important document in modern Rwandan political development” (Wagoner 1968: 158). The *Bahutu Manifesto* challenged every facet of Rwandan society:

Some people have asked whether this is a social or a racial conflict ... In reality and in the minds of men it is both. It can, however, be narrowed down for it is primarily a question of a political monopoly held by one race, the Mututsi, and, in view of the social situation as a whole, it has become an economic and social monopoly. In view, also, of the *de facto* selection in education, this political, economic and social monopoly has also become a cultural monopoly, to the great despair of the Bahutu, who see themselves condemned forever to the role of subordinate manual workers, and this, worse still, after achieving an independence which they will have unwittingly helped to obtain (Niyonzima and others 1957: 3).

The *Bahutu Manifesto* identified a range of problems facing Rwanda and even proposed numerous solutions –

all of them highlighting a fundamental racial component. Thus integral to Rwanda's economic development was reform of the land ownership system, based upon traditional Tutsi privilege; while integral to education development was equitable access to education and government-funded scholarships (Niyonzima and others 1957). Political development required "that Bahutu should in fact be promoted to public office", and that positions such as sub-chiefs and chiefs should be elected by taxpayers (Niyonzima and others 1957: 8). For the Hutu counter-elite, the fundamental problem was Tutsi racial privilege, and addressing this issue was crucial for all areas of Rwanda's political and economic development.

The *Bahutu Manifesto* was prepared to highlight the critical issue of race relations to the 1957 UN Visiting Mission. The Visiting Mission also received a starkly different account of race relations in Rwanda, however, in *Mise au Point*, the *Statement of Views*. Published by the Superior Council, comprising Rwanda's Tutsi political elite, the *Statement of Views* also viewed race relations as "the fundamental problem in our country now" (High Council of State 1957: Annex II). Yet astonishingly, this statement was not referring to the problems of Hutu-Tutsi race relations – which did not rate a mention in the entire document – but race relations between whites and non-whites in the country. This highlights the high degree of racial awareness and the hierarchical nature of Rwandan society, but also a strong desire to de-emphasise the Hutu-Tutsi distinction and recast Rwanda as a homogenous nation in a bid for the elite to retain its power (Atterbury 1970). The primary focus of the *Statement of Views* was on preparing Rwanda for rapid independence, through proper training, recognition and utilisation of the current indigenous elite (Wagoner 1968). Self-government was an interim goal, and the Statement noted "It would be difficult at the present to specify when

it will be possible to grant us self-government, but we are anxious that we should be trained for self-government now" (High Council of State 1957: Annex II). The Superior Council's desire for rapid self-government, and omission of the Hutu-Tutsi issue, reflected an awareness of the potential threat posed by the nascent Hutu political movement, and a response designed "so they, the Tutsi, could use the machinery of government to maintain their power" (Webster 1966: 40). Both the *Bahutu Manifesto* and the *Statement of Views* were key documents in that they "provided the ideological basis for much of the political action which followed" (Webster 1966: 40; Harroy 1984: 237).

The second factor that contributed to the rapid ethnic polarisation of Rwanda during this period is the lack of responsiveness of both the Belgian colonial authorities and the UN Visiting Missions to this critical issue. Despite the *Bahutu Manifesto* and the *Statement of Views*, arguably neither authority realised the importance or disintegrative potential of the race relations issue prior to late 1959. The 1954 Visiting Mission completed failed to mention the problem of sub-group identity, and it was left to the Belgians to point this out in criticising their report (United Nations 1955: 47). Yet the Belgian authorities themselves made no attempts to address the issue. In 1956, a proposal to include Hutu representation on the (colonial-led) General Council of Ruanda-Urundi was defeated, leading its only proponent to resign. In a parting shot, Mr. Maus bemoaned "the conflict of interests between the Tutsi and Hutu communities which is the most pressing social problem and the most poignant human drama in the Territory, will therefore continue to be officially ignored by our institutions" (United Nations 1960: 40).

The *Bahutu Manifesto* and *Statement of Views* ensured at least some level of official acknowledgement of the race

relations issue in 1957, but led to little real action. The UN Visiting Mission welcomed "the increasing rate at which the traditional society in Ruanda-Urundi is adapting itself to modern democratic ideas and forms" (United Nations 1957: 9). Yet it also acknowledged, for the first time, that the acceleration of political development for which previous Missions had pressed so strenuously might be a cause of political turmoil (Rawson 1966):

The inevitable disintegration of such a civilisation [traditional Rwandan society] on contact with the modern world and its replacement by new forms may give rise to serious difficulties in spite of all the Administering Authority's vigilance (United Nations 1957: 12).

While noting the "especially delicate stage" of Rwanda's political development, it had little to offer of value, with hazy statements such as "Without minimising the danger of haste, the Mission believes that over-cautiousness is no less dangerous" (United Nations 1957: 12). The only practical suggestion it proposed – with extraordinary optimism – was further education:

Under the influence of secondary and university education and of contact with the outside world, traditional conceptions are giving way and the *elite* of the old regime are coming up against a new *elite*. It will not be long – and indeed there are already indications of this – before the traditional political structure and the respect for feudal institutions will be as irksome to the rising generation of young educated Batutsi as to the new Bahutu *elite* (United Nations 1957: 23).

The 1957 Mission appeared to seriously underestimate both the importance and severity of the issues surrounding race relations in Rwanda.

There is conflicting evidence as to how seriously the Belgian Administering Authorities regarded the Hutu-Tutsi

problem. Certainly they recognised the “deep cleavages which divide the Batutsi, the Bahutu [and] the Batwa ... Those cleavages are obvious ... and they dominate the whole of social life” (United Nations 1955: 47). But the stratified nature of society in Rwanda had been uncontested for decades – and indeed utilised as the basis of indirect rule – and the new Hutu challenge to Tutsi domination appears not to have been perceived as a pressing issue prior to the Hutu uprising in late 1959. Afterwards, this rapidly changed, and the report of the 1960 Visiting Mission claimed that “In his discussions with the 1957 Visiting Mission, the Governor described relations between the Tutsi and Hutu as the key problem of the Territory” (United Nations 1960: 42). But if that was the case, it was not clearly described as such in either the 1957 report, or Belgium’s annual reports on the Trust Territory. Indeed, a careful reading of documents during this period suggests that Vice-Governor General Jean-Paul Harroy did not concede until December 1958 that “the Hutu-Tutsi question posed an undeniable problem” – some twenty-two months after the *Bahutu Manifesto*’s publication (Lemarchand 1970: 152).

To the extent that the problem was recognised, the Administering Authorities appeared unsure how to address it. The General Council of Ruanda-Urundi passed a motion to study the *Manifesto*, but repeatedly postponed discussion of the Hutu-Tutsi polarisation (United Nations 1960). Governor Harroy initially adopted a stance that aligned closely with the position of the Tutsi elite, suggesting that the Hutu-Tutsi problem was largely an economic (rather than racial) issue, and warning of ‘misuse’ of the terms Hutu and Tutsi (United Nations 1960). This aligned with the Administration’s early position in favour of abolishing the terms Hutu and Tutsi – a position advocated by the Tutsi elite but strongly opposed in the *Bahutu Manifesto* for its potential to mask

discrimination (Niyonzima et al 1957: 11). As the democratisation process gathered pace ahead of anticipated independence, it did so in an environment of increasing polarisation.

The third, critical factor that contributed to the extremity of the ethnic polarisation was the confluence of the race relations issue with the democratisation and independence process. The rapid pace of decolonisation precluded the use of longer term conciliatory and ameliorative policies that might have improved Hutu-Tutsi relations over time. Rather, each side perceived the issue as immediate rather than chronic, and one that must be resolved prior to independence. Increasingly, that resolution came to be visualised as through a 'victory' of one group at the expense of the other. By 1959 the disastrous potential of the convergence of the race relations issue and the independence process was clear. Observer M.A. Munyangaju summed up the atmosphere on 30 January:

The situation is very tense between Bahutu and Batutsi. A small quarrel would be enough for starting off a ranged battle. The Batutsi realise that after this, everything is finished for them and are preparing for the last chance. The Bahutu also see that a trial of strength is in the making and do not wish to give up (Quoted in Bhattacharyya 1967: 218).

Race was *the* political issue when political parties were allowed to form. Thus the founding charter of *Union Nationale Rwandaise* (UNAR), the party of the Tutsi elite, declared in August 1959:

Although the Ruandais society is composed of individuals of highly unequal value, and it is not equitable to accord the same value to the vulgar thoughts of the ordinary man as to the perspicacious judgment of the capable ... Although universal suffrage will infallibly end in the enslavement of the educated minority by an uncultivated majority ... It is nevertheless

impossible to refuse universal suffrage to the Bahutu. An open opposition will provide one more argument to the colonists whose civilisation ... [and] loyalty is now known (UNAR Charter, in Nkundabagenzi 1961, translation utilised from Bhattacharyya 1967: 248).

The most popular Hutu party, *Mouvement Démocratique Rwandais / Parti du Mouvement et de l'Emancipation Hutu* (MDR-PARMEHUTU), announced its goal as "a true union of all the Rwandan people without any race dominating another as is the case today" (Manifeste-Programme du Parmehutu 1959, in Nkundabagenzi 1961: 113). The few, quiet proponents of moderation received little support. The bitterness of the debate is further illustrated by a September 1959 press release from the Hutu social party APROSOMA, which began "The plans of the Tutsi party in Ruanda – representing the Tutsi who are exploiters by nature, xenophobes [sic] by instinct and communists by necessity ..." (United Nations 1959:1). By November of 1959, these divisive, race-based politics contributed to the outbreak of the Hutu uprising, the first major incident of interethnic violence in the country.

Conclusion

Ultimately, Rwanda was nation forged from a violent, divisive and racially-driven independence process. After the 1959 uprising, race relations continued to polarise and radicalise, despite some moderating efforts by the Belgian colonial authorities and the UN Trusteeship authorities. There were repeated incidents of ethnic violence through to the nation's independence in July 1962 and beyond. For the Tutsi elite and Hutu counter-elite, at least, the potential for this polarisation had been apparent from 1957. As the 1960 Visiting Mission to Rwanda remarked about the *Bahutu Manifesto* and the *Statement of Views*:

Those two documents contain the germ of all the ideological elements which inspired the disturbances of November 1959 and led to the Visiting Mission being received in Ruanda in March 1960 with mutually contradictory slogans: "Immediate independence. Get rid of the Belgians for us" and "Down with Tutsi feudalism. Long live Belgian Trusteeship" (United Nations 1960: 41-42).

Yet neither the Belgian Administration nor the Visiting Missions appear to have fully appreciated the critical nature of the race relations issue until it resulted in the first major outbreak of violence. It can only be speculated as to whether earlier recognition of the critical nature of race relations by the colonial authorities, and a more decisive response to the emerging polarisation, could have averted some of the violence that eventually resulted. Unfortunately, however, by the time the severity of the issue was properly recognised, the political environment was already highly polarised and opportunities for reconciliation severely circumscribed. Rwanda was born a nation divided.

Author Note

Dr. Deborah Mayersen is the Program Leader for the Prevention of Genocide and Mass Atrocities at the Asia-Pacific Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, School of Political Science and International Studies, at The University of Queensland. An historian, her research interests are in the field of genocide studies and genocide prevention. Dr. Mayersen can be contacted at d.mayersen@uq.edu.au

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