# Contested Identities: Power and the Fictions of Ethnicity, Ethnography and History in Rwanda

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***Abstract:*** This article examines the process through which different interpretations of ethnicity and statehood in Rwanda have been used to create and justify policies of exclusion, inclusion and claims to legitimacy, from the colonial period to the present day. Arguing that the roots of such politics can be found in the politics of the precolonial state, it considers how they have been transformed, not created, by colonial and postcolonial governments. Viewing the representation of ethnicity and statehood over time as fictions of ethnicity, ethnography and history, this article illustrates the process of creation and recreation of these fictions and their impact on Rwandan lives.

***Résumé:*** Cet article étudie le processus dans lequel les différentes interprétations de l'ethnicité et du statut étatique au Rwanda ont l'habitude de créer et justifier des politiques d'exclusion et d'inclusion, ainsi que de prétendre à la légitimité, de la période coloniale à nos jours. Considérant que les bases de ces politiques peuvent être trouvées dans les politiques de l'état précolonial, on réfléchit à la façon dont elles ont été transformées, et non créées, par les gouvernements coloniaux ou postcoloniaux. Considérant la représentation de l'ethnicité et du statut étatique au cours du temps, comme étant l'ethnicité, l'ethnographie et l'histoire, cet article illustre le processus de création de ces fictions et leur impact sur les vies rwandaises.

In the fall of 1994, during a private conversation, an officer of a large donor organization expressed her amazement to me that two different ministers of the Rwandan Patriotic Front government which had just been installed in Kigali placed the rewriting of history books as a first priority of the government. Given the general devastation found in the country, this seemed an incomprehensible priority to her. She asked me why this aspect of Rwandan culture was so overwhelmingly important to the current government. Any observer of Rwanda quickly becomes aware of the powerful hold that the interpretation of history and the nature of ethnicity has on any discussion of Rwanda. The origin and meaning of ethnicity in Rwanda, and the nature of the precolonial state have been topics of debate since the first German set foot in the region. For Western observers, these debates have been largely academic, but for the people living in the region these controversies have had serious consequences. Different interpretations of ethnicity and statehood have been used to create and justify policies of exclusion, inclusion and claims to legitimacy, from the colonial period to the present day.

Most recently the whole issue of ethnicity and the precolonial, colonial and postcolonial state in Rwanda has been reopened by the events of 1959-94. In different ways the Rwandans who fled Rwanda in 1959, the Rwandans who remained in Rwanda after 1959, the three successive governments since 1959, the extremists, the opposition and the propagandists of the various political parties in the region, and politicians in the neighbouring countries have interpreted and reinterpreted the "history" of the precolonial and colonial state to justify various policies and actions.

Viewed through the lens of serious research this whole debate can be seen as a series of fictions: fictions of ethnicity, ethnography and history in Rwanda. Rwanda is a particularly fascinating case, because the manipulation of these fictions has been so transparent, and because it has affected the lives of all the people living in

the Great Lakes region of the country. This article will illustrate these characterizations of ethnicity, history and the state in Rwanda and will present an alternative perspective on them, showing how various concepts of ethnicity and "history" have been manipulated by successive governments. It will then consider the genocide in the light of this review.

## Fictions of History

Many discussions of Rwandan precolonial history, and of the construction of the precolonial state continue to be highly reductionist (for recent examples see African Rights, 1994; Braeckman, 1994; Destexhe, 1994; Mamdani, 1996). This is due, in part, to the complexity of the subject and the need to make it easily comprehensible, but it is also the result of manipulation for political ends by various groups. Beginning in the precolonial period, intensifying and transmuting under the Belgian colonial period, undergoing further transformation under the first and second Republic and altering again under the current government, the rewriting of history has been a major academic and political project in Rwanda. Central to this project has been the characterization of the nature of precolonial rule, and the role played by various ethnic groups in the precolonial state.

There is no shortage of writings on the precolonial state, both within and outside Rwanda, but there is little agreement about the nature of that state. Authors such as the Abbé Kagame (1972), Gravel (1965, 1968a, 1968b), Maquet (1961a, 1961b, 1967, 1969), Mair (1961) and even Vansina (1963) see the Rwandan state as an equitable albeit somewhat hierarchical state, contending that the clientage system, while unequal, was based on reciprocity and offered strong benefits to the clients. On the basis of this material Basil Davidson tells us:

> Ruanda . . . was the post-colonial descendant of an old kingship in these pleasant uplands along the southern reach of the East African Rift. The general nineteenth-century move toward more emphatic forms of centralised power had developed the dominance of a minority group, the Tutsi, over a Hutu majority. But the manner of this nineteenth-century dominance was mild, and was regulated by "lord and vassal" relationships which had some resemblance to the simpler forms of European feudalism. "The rich man in his castle and the poor man at his gate" appear to have been the outward and visible forms of a mutually acceptable relationship between Tutsi and Hutu; at least in principle these forms represented an agreed sharing of rights and duties. Colonial enclosure changed all that. (Davidson, 1992: 249)

On the other hand, some powerful proponents in the Rwandan scholarly community, most notably Nahimana (1987), emphasized the exploitative nature of the precolonial state, the role of the Tutsi in this state and the Tutsi's status as an "outsider" group. Starting from the premise that the Tutsi are invaders and the Hutu the "natural inhabitants" of the land, this work seeks to discredit the right of Tutsi either to rule or even to inhabit Rwanda. This rewriting of the "Hamitic hypothesis," the idea that the Tutsi are a separate racial group coming from Ethiopia who invaded Rwanda, has formed a basis for the appalling propaganda of the "Hutu Power" extremists of the last regime. This perspective has been well documented by Chrétien and the Reporters sans frontières (1995).

## Meta-Conflict and History

However, these diametrically opposed views overlook the work done by both Rwandan and Western scholars from the 1960s until the present day, which shows the complex and changing nature of the precolonial state and precolonial Rwandan history (Des Forges, 1972; Lemarchand, 1994; Meschy, 1974; C. Newbury, 1974, 1978, 1980, 1983, 1988; D.S. Newbury, 1980, 1981, 1987, 1995; Rwabukumba and Mudandagizi, 1974; Vidal, 1969, 1974, 1984, 1985, 1991). The debate over whether the precolonial state was equitable or exploitative can be considered to form the elements of a "meta-conflict," that is to say, a conflict about the nature of the conflict. Lemarchand has coined this phrase to describe the nature of the equivalent debate in Burundi. He tells us that:

> It is one thing for a reasonably dispassionate observer to try and assess the roots of the Hutu-Tutsi problem; but how members of each community perceive their predicament, what each attempts to suppress as well as invent, is an altogether different matter. (Lemarchand, 1994: 17)

Instead the political actors involved in the conflict in Burundi each connect:

> past and present through divergent paths. No attempt to demystify the Burundi situation can fail to appreciate the chasm that separates the reality of ethnic conflict from the manner in which it is perceived, explained and mythologized by the participants. Reduced to its essentials, the conflict about the Hutu-Tutsi conflict revolves around three basic disagreements: the significance of ethnicity as a source of tension; the nature of cultural differentiation between Hutu and Tutsi; and the role of history in shaping ethnic antagonisms. (Ibid.)

The same is true for Rwanda: although Rwanda and Burundi approach the current problems they face through different historical paths, their intertwined current histories mean that the "meta-conflict," the conflict about the nature of the conflict, has ended up being phrased in similar terms. This article will focus on the final point that Lemarchand raises, the debate about the history of Rwanda and the nature of precolonial structures in the debate over the role of history in shaping ethnic antagonisms. One of the ironies of Rwanda is that ethnicity is hard to define in Rwanda, because people have the same culture, language, religion, share a common history, live together and intermarry. Despite this, these labels are recognized by people and have power, and that provides a minimum definition of ethnicity. Ethnicity is a very malleable category, and the history of ethnicity in Rwanda shows this clearly, as this work will clearly demonstrate.

## Interpretations of History and "Being Rwandan"

Fundamentally, the debate about the role of history in shaping ethnic antagonisms centres on what it means to be Rwandan. Although, as we shall see, this debate was transformed by the colonial characterization of the Batutsi and Bahutu. David Newbury points out that competing visions of Rwandan identity and the meaning of ethnicity are not new. Rather, Newbury argues, they arise out of competing criteria for "defining Rwanda" in the precolonial state:

> ... the ambiguity of defining Rwanda was not only a product of differing views between the power holders and the powerless, it was also an ambiguity apparent within the ruling class, as the state sought both to expand territorially and to consolidate its power internally. At times the court defined being Rwandan in terms of upper-class court values.... At others the court defined Rwandan culture by language alone.... Similarly with political issues: official perceptions treated power in class terms, as defined by effective state penetration.... At other times, they defined the political unit to include all Kinyarwanda-speakers, whether or not they accepted the exercise of central court power. (D.S. Newbury, 1995: 12)

Therefore, Newbury argues that the competing characterizations of the nature of "being Rwandan" wavered between conceptualizations which excluded the large majority of the population from power, and the vision of a single political unit based on criteria of inclusion in the state (ibid.). He contends that, by building on different aspects of this identity, political leaders of both ethnic groups have "reinvented" Rwanda for their own purposes.

## An Alternate View of the Precolonial State

When we turn to the recent historical, political, geographical and anthropological work done on precolonial Rwanda, we find a "history" far more complex than the competing characterizations of the Rwandan state would have us believe. The image of "mild dominance" is shattered by the turbulent transformation in land, labour and power relations. Similarly, Davidson's bland "move towards more emphatic forms of centralised power" (Davidson, 1992: 249), becomes a longer and more violent process through which land and power are centralized into the hands of a tiny aristocratic elite.

The image of the brutal "Hamitic" invader is challenged by evidence that the Nyaginya dynasty moved from the area which is now eastern Rwanda into the preexisting agriculturalist and pastoralist kingdoms to the west, north, southwest and northwest, by the long history of coexistence, and by the process of assimilation of disparate groups into the state. Jan Vansina (1962), David Newbury (1987), Alison Des Forges (1972) and J.K. Rennie (1972) all speculate that the original Tutsi kingdom was modelled on these agricultural states, in which kings (*baami,* or *bahinzi*) had a sacred function and only minimal political or economic control. The core of the current Rwandan state appears to have been established in the 14th or 15th century[1] by Ndahiro Ruyange. This kingship was closely tied to the larger Gesera kingdom, and continued to be associated with that kingdom until the 16th century. The position of the Rwandan king (*mwami*) appears to have been as the "first among equals" with the kingship exercising very little power over the population and none over the means of production. Judging from oral history accounts and material from the peripheries of the Rwandan state, the most important political units were lineages and neighbourhood groups and the main powers were vested in the hands of the lineage heads.

Amongst the agricultural groups, these heads distributed land within the lineage and granted land to individuals who came and demanded it. These clients of the lineage (*abagerwa*) had an obligation to provide gifts of food or beer to the lineage in return for the *use* of land. The land continued to belong to the lineage and could be withdrawn by the lineage. Clients could marry into the lineage and so become members (Des Forges, 1972: 2;

Rennie, 1972: 16; Vansina, 1962: 60-62). The frontiers of this kingdom appear to have been expanded by settlement in already pioneered land and by conquest (Rennie, 1972: 16). However this state differed from its neighbours in that it established "a continuing, strongly centralized political organisation with institutions which incorporated both pastoralists and agriculturalists" (ibid.: 25).

In the 16th century, Kigeri Mukobanya enlarged the ceremonial and real powers of the king (*mwami*) and established a permanent military organization. He formed the *ntore*, small armies, and organized them into *ngabo*, larger armies, founded on the basis of lineages. Power was based on control of men and not control of land. The leaders of these *ngabo* exacted tribute (*ikoro*) from the region they controlled, and although they sent a share of this tribute to the central court, they were relatively independent of it. This organization was initially implemented out of military necessity because of the threat posed by the powerful kingdoms which bordered the state. However, it soon became a mechanism for assimilating populations, exacting services and goods and punishing those that did not comply with these demands (D.S. Newbury, 1987: 170).

*Umuheto*, a form of clientage between less powerful and more powerful lineages, grew in importance at this time. Under this form of clientage less powerful cattle-owning lineages gave a cow or cows to the more powerful lineage in return for protection of their herds (Des Forges, 1972: 5-6; Vansina, 1962: 65). During the 16th and 17th centuries the war chiefs, the leaders (*umutware*) of the *ngabo*, became increasingly powerful. They started to take over the functions of the lineage heads, settling disputes and appropriating the right to distribute vacant lands. This began to erode the power of the lineage heads and reduce the size of the effective functioning unit of the lineage (Des Forges, 1972; Vansina, 1962).

The process of erosion of lineage power was accelerated in the 18th century. To pre-empt the control of the war chiefs, the *baami* asserted their exclusive right to control land by enlarging the powers of the *abanyabutaka*, "men of the land." These men, who had been responsible for provisioning the Court when it resided in a region and for provisioning the household of the *mwami*'s wife who lived in the region, became responsible for collecting an annual tribute (in kind) from the agriculturalists. Hutu, who received land from these chiefs, owed labour service, also called *uburetwa*, in which they worked two out of every five days for the land chief. This new institution began to redirect the focus of power from the lineage to chiefs appointed from above (Des Forges, 1972: 7; Rwabukumba and Mudandagizi, 1974: 7, 10-11; Vansina, 1962: 68-70). The process of centralization of power and land in Rwanda intensified differentiation at the lineage level. Rwabukumba and Mudandagizi have shown that the clientage relationships, like *umuheto*—though based on lineages—linked the fortunes of different lineage segments to those of their particular patrons rather than to the fortunes of the larger lineage group (Rwabukumba and Mudandagizi 1974: 18-19).

Over time the land chiefs and the war chiefs lay claims to common lands, which they appropriated and distributed to clients. The large majority of these lands were common pasture lands. In response to this development, Yuhi Gahindiro established a new set of officials, *abanyamukenke* (men of the grass) to assert Court control over pasture land and collect prestations for its use. To break up the territories controlled by the powerful chiefs, he also created small personal holdings called *ibikingi* which he distributed to his favourites. These people controlled all rights over that land, could take on clients and exact tribute, and were not responsible to the local chiefs, only to the *mwami*.

Associated with these changes was the development of a form of personal clientage called *ubuhake*, and of land clientage, *isambu*. In the former the relationship was marked by the transfer of the usufruct of a cow from the patron to the client. In the latter a form of heritable tenure over land was given in return for payments in kind. Both of these could be revoked at the whim of the patron. During this time *uburetwa*, land clientage linked to labour service, continued to grow in importance. As these forms of clientage became more widespread, the *mwami* used these institutions to his own advantage, asserting a hierarchy of clientage in which the king was the supreme patron. The effective lineage unit became progressively smaller, as members of the same lineages were drawn into different relationships based on clientage and locality (Des Forges, 1972: 7-8; Rwabukumba and Mudandagizi, 1974: 13-15; Vansina, 1962: 68-70; Vidal, 1969: 396).

Although the process of centralization intensified in the mid-17th century, it was the *Mwami* Rwabugiri (1865-1895), who thoroughly consolidated the system of clientage, smashed the power of the lineages and centralized the powers of the chiefs. Rwabugiri's expansion of his kingdom through conquest, was accompanied by the wholesale extermination or incorporation of a previously independent lineage-based elite and the systematic appropriation of lineage, community and fallow lands (Rwabukumba and Mudandagizi, 1974: 19). Des Forges

tells us that Rwabugiri "brought the notables to heel" through " ruthless terror and astute manipulation of rivalries" (1972: 13). By the beginning of the 20th century, the majority of the population was part of a dependent peasantry.

## Expansion and Assimilation under the Precolonial State

The expansion of the Rwandan state was not a smooth and relentless conquest of the neighbouring kingdoms and regions. Rather, it grew and contracted under different reigns, until the mid-18th century to the end of the 19th century when there was a systematic push into the peripheries (Vansina, 1962: 97). Tutsi colonialism, especially after the 17th century, followed a distinct pattern. The newly incorporated areas were first placed under the rule of different lineage-based war chiefs and armies. Although these chiefs ruled the region, the king (*mwami*) also established a residence controlled by a wife or by a favourite.

A process of assimilation took place under the armies and through Tutsi settlers. Local cattle-holding lineages came to be considered Tutsi, while local agriculturalists were considered "non-Tutsi," and over time were classed as "Hutu." This history of warfare, conquest and assimilation happened more often with states we would consider to be "Tutsi" than "Hutu. As the state expanded from the 14th century on groups were incorporated as Hutu if they were predominantly farmers, or as Tutsi if they were predominantly herders, and aristocrats of both "groups" were assimilated and intermarried with the old aristocracy. Over time this state became a highly effective colonial state. It was also a state in which the nature of power changed over time, and these changes had political, social, economic and cultural implications. As the power of the Tutsi grew in the region, the state began to extend other aspects of central administration into these regions, until they were fully incorporated into the central state (Des Forges, 1972, 1986; C. Newbury, 1988; D.S. Newbury, 1987: 169-170; Vansina, 1962).

Under Rwabugiri, the administrative system was extended into the peripheries of the kingdom and the system of clientage and land tenure was spread even further downward affecting all levels of society (C. Newbury, 1978: 19). Despite the unprecedented power of this organization, at the time of colonialism, the Tutsi kingdom only had tenuous control in much of the north and had only just integrated a good part of the east (Freedman, 1984: 95, Vansina 1962: 96). In the areas under control of the court, Rwabugiri systematically crushed the power of the local chiefs and lords. Through manipulation of rivalries and through assassination and terror, he was able to replace the independent, hereditary chiefs with men who were dependent on him for their positions. To extend their control, these chiefs, in turn, instituted clientage relationships with the local population. The appropriation of land, the destruction of the lineage system and increasing population density made these ties increasingly necessary for peasant survival (Des Forges, 1972: 14-15; Meschy, 1974: 39-51; C. Newbury, 1974: 26-38; C. Newbury, 1978: 17-29; Rwabukumba and Mudandagizi, 1974: 6-25; Vansina, 1962: 60, 71-72, 90; Vidal, 1969: 384-401; Vidal, 1974: 52-74). Where control was more recent, such as in the southwest and in the northwest, many forms of tenure and leadership coexisted (Des Forges, 1986; Fairhead, 1990; Freedman, 1984: 93-98; C. Newbury 1988; Vansina, 1962). Therefore we can see that the precolonial state was never one single coherent unit with two tribes, but rather a state created by conquest and assimilation of a disparate group of peoples.

In 1895, Kigeri Rwabugiri died and Mibambwe Rutarindwa who had been ruling as co-regnant for 10 years was enthroned. The Queen-mother, Kanjogera, with her brothers, began a civil war to establish her own son, Musinga, on the throne. During this civil war, control over the north was lost and control over the west became less secure. Musinga, a minor, was established on the throne in 1896. However, the independent reign of Musinga was short-lived. German colonial rule was established in 1898 (Des Forges, 1972, 1986).

## Changing Ethnic Relations in the Precolonial State

The period from the mid-17th century until the European rule saw dramatic changes in the Rwandan state. The power of kin groups which had formed the centre of political and economic life up to the early 19th century was destroyed, and in its place a system of one to one (patron-client) ties between hierarchically ordered individuals gave people access to land and power. However, it was the king Rwabugiri, in the 50 years before colonialism, who finally smashed the power of the lineages by exterminating or incorporating a previously independent lineage-based elite and taking central control over lineage, community and fallow lands. This period also saw the transformation of "ethnic" categories and their meaning in Rwanda (Meschi, 1974; C. Newbury, 1988; Rwabukumba and Mudandagizi 1974; Vidal, 1974).

By the beginning of the 20th century, the majority of the population in the central regions of Rwanda was part of a dependent peasantry. The best possible option for these peasants was to establish a one-to-one tie with a lord. In return for land, the peasant owed the lord two days labour, 50 percent of his harvest and a series of taxes and other services. The worst situation was one in which the whole family worked as hired labourers in return for pay in food, and still owed obligations and taxes to the lords. Claudine Vidal argues that as much as 50 percent of peasants worked as wage labourers on a regular basis at the beginning of this century, even if they had some land (Vidal, 1974: 58-64). During this time, the relationship between lords and peasants was beginning to take on a distinctly ethnic flavour. Under Rwabugiri, Central Rwanda saw the beginnings of an important distinction between Hutu, Tutsi and Twa which determined access to various resources, which cross-cut classes and which provided differential obligations.

The elite, who by 1898 were mostly Tutsi, saw themselves as distinctly superior to both poor Hutu and poor Tutsi. In addition, some rich Hutu, who gained favour in the court married Tutsi women and their children became Tutsi. Still, the vast majority of the Tutsi were commoners who had more in common with the Hutu peasants than with the Tutsi lords, while the Hutu lords, who formed a minority in the elite, had little in common with the Hutu peasants whom they exploited (Chrétien, 1985: 150; C. Newbury, 1978: 21, and 1988: 13; Vidal, 1969: 399).

## European Colonial State: Fictions of History

Ethnic categories were becoming increasingly important at the end of the precolonial period, but ethnic-based "castes" only crystallized during the Belgian period, which began in 1912. There was always an uneasy relationship between the elite and the Belgians, but with the need to make a profit out of the colony, and the need to rule through the elite, a power struggle developed between the court and the colonial administration. Despite their dissatisfaction with certain members of the aristocracy, the Belgians saw the Tutsi as the "natural" rulers of Rwanda (Vidal, 1973: 37). The Belgians began a campaign to remove the king and the recalcitrant aristocrats by supporting one faction within the elite against another, trying to further the careers of those Tutsi they saw as favourable to their policies. To do this they embarked on a frankly racist set of policies. It was no longer membership in an elite family which gave the lords a right to rule, but membership in a superior race, "the Tutsi." Under this formulation, the Tutsi were characterised as "Hamitic" invaders who ruled the inferior "Bantu" populations which they had conquered (see Prunier, 1995: 5-9 for an overview of the worst of this literature, Maquet, 1961a: 11-12 for a moderate, colonial period view of "racial" differences).

Using this ideology, the Belgians were able to place their hand-picked recruits in power, and to overthrow the king and put one of his mission-educated sons on the throne. To justify their racist vision of Rwanda they were obliged to purge the government of a few thousand Hutu lords.[2] Other racist policies were put into place. For example, the schools, which were designated for training future administrators, were deliberately restricted to Tutsi students alone (Des Forges, 1972: 198; Lemarchand, 1970: 73; Vidal, 1973: 35) and a height regulation was put into place to judge the degree of "Tutsiness." The ideology of the period promoted the idea that the Tutsi were born to rule, which reflected European social/racial theories of the day. This was the 1920s and 1930s, the period of eugenics in the U.S. and Europe and Nazism in Germany.

At the same time, the Europeans began a policy of encouraging the chiefs to undertake large-scale cash cropping, especially coffee and vegetables, with the use of corvée labour. In addition, there was an expansion of European public works projects. European enterprises, such as plantations, industries and mines, also demanded that the government provide labour. This labour was often recruited by ordering the chiefs to produce a set number of workers for a given day. Chiefs, who were not able to do so, lost their positions, those who complied became wealthy (Chrétien, 1978; C. Newbury, 1988: 165-176).

The development of new institutions, like the introduction of "native tribunals" in 1936, only increased the power of the Tutsi elite. These were headed only by Tutsi chiefs and were used to expand Tutsi power and legitimize abuses (Lemarchand 1970: 75-76.) Earlier the Belgians had banned dissatisfied subjects or clients from seeking new patrons. These "reforms" effectively destroyed the sole means which had enabled the peasantry to escape an oppressive lord. It is not surprising that Belgian reforms after the World War II did nothing to change the situation of the peasantry. Between 1949 and 1954, various reforms were made "on paper" but the reality did not change: peasants were only able to get land by making ties with lords, and lords still needed the labour and were still responsible to the state for labour and taxes.

However it must also be stressed that the Tutsi ruling elite played a role in this process. The king, Rudahigwa, crystallized the "Tutsi ideology" through research and publications on his dynastic history (especially the writings of the Abbé Kagame), through sports, arts, clothing and through the choice of court members and members of foreign delegations (Chrétien, 1985: 146-147). "Traditional" Rwanda was essentially reconstructed during this period (Chrétien, 1985: 146).

## The Colonial State: Fictions of Ethnography

Research during the colonial period by both Tutsi and Europeans promoted "the vision . . . of a timeless feudal state" (Chrétien 1985: 147, my translation). One of the most blatant cases of this is the study by Maquet. In discussing his ethnography on the precolonial system of government, he states that he did not interview any Hutu because "the more competent people on political organisation were the Tutsi" (Maquet, 1961: 3). He justifies this by arguing that his "aim was not to assess the opinions and knowledge of the whole of the Ruanda population on their past political organisation, but to discover *as accurately as possible* what that organisation was" (ibid., my emphasis). This new vision of ethnicity in Rwanda was filled with contradictions and anomalies, not the least of which was that all three "ethnicities" or "castes" were represented in every clan. However, at the same time that Maquet was working on this study, the Belgian colonial policies were changing, through pressure from the UN and from the new Belgian clergy and administrators who were of "relatively humble social origins" and so "were more generally disposed to identify with the plight of the Hutu masses" (Lemarchand, 1970: 134, 138).

By the late 1940s and 1950s, the Belgians faced strong pressure from the United Nations to reform the administrative system. However, the reforms had little effect. The revolutionary political events of the 1950s and 1960s grew out of this situation. The reforms forced the Belgians to educate some Hutu, but they still excluded these educated Hutu from power, both political and economic. This educated cadre formed a whole series of political parties, which eventually coalesced into a Hutu extremist party, the Parmehutu, who rewrote history to reflect their claim that racially the Hutu held the right to rule Rwanda (C. Newbury, 1980, 1988).

## The Postcolonial State and Fictions of Ethnicity and History

The anti-Tutsi rhetoric grew in intensity and the Belgians championed the new "natural" rulers of Rwanda, the Hutu. The years 1959-61 saw considerable turbulence and bloodshed. Initially, anti-Tutsi sentiments took the form of land invasions and the harassment of the Tutsi who were powerful, affluent or well connected, however this soon escalated into bloodshed (Codere, 1973). In 1962, when the Parmehutu party was elected to power with Gregoire Kayibanda as President, the reconstruction of the "Hamitic Hypothesis" intensified. The first and only elected Rwandan government drew its strength from a pro-Hutu, racist ideology. This government became increasingly corrupt, and by the late 1960s and early 1970s it had concentrated access to resources, opportunities and power into the hands of a tiny elite.

In 1973, faced with opposition from northern factions who began to be openly critical of the regime, and the growing discontent of the poor, who began to attack the rich, Kayibanda incited ethnic violence in the schools and university. However, Kayibanda lost control of this process and the Parmehutu party fell to a northern coup d'état on July 5, 1973 (C. Newbury, 1992: 197-198; Reyntjens, 1994: 29). This was a very popular coup, because it reduced both the ethnic violence and the level of government corruption in Rwanda (Reyntjens, 1994: 29). Reyntjens explains:

> Today, it is forgotten that President Habyarimana was particularly popular with Tutsi in the country, and that he was accused of favouring this group by some Hutu groups. (Reyntjens, 1994: 35-36; my translation)

## Background to the Genocide

By 1989, Habyarimana was facing a crisis. There was growing discontent with his regime and at the same time the country was required to undergo serious economic restructuring. The invasion of the Rwandan Patriotic Front, in 1990, the majority of whom were Tutsi, provided a propaganda opportunity which deflected criticism of the military regime. Interclass conflicts arose out of the policies of the Habyarimana regime in this period, during which the disparity between rich and poor grew enormously throughout the country and the political and social distance between elites and the predominantly rural poor grew as well (Newbury, 1992: 203; Reyntjens, 1994: 32 n.47, 33).

Economic recession and economic restructuring played a critical role in the growth of this disparity and of

extremism in Rwanda. The fall of coffee prices by 50 percent in 1989 meant that hundreds of thousands of households lost 50 percent of their cash incomes because most of the coffee was grown by small holders. The economic restructuring, which followed, made food prices soar, salaries fall, public services collapse and led to a 40 percent devaluation of the Rwandan Franc (Chossudovsky, 1995a; Newbury and Newbury, 1994: 1; Olson, 1994: 4). In the early 1990s several areas of the country suffered a drought and for the first time since independence people could not afford to buy food, emergency stocks had been reduced and people died of hunger (Newbury, 1992; Newbury and Newbury, 1994). During this period the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) invaded and arms flooded the country (Chossudovsky 1995b; Newbury and Newbury, 1994: 1-2; Reyntjens, 1994: 151-154; Human Rights Watch/Africa, 1994).

At the same time, the population bomb exploded. There was little land for the new group of youth reaching the age of majority, in an economy which remained based on agriculture and in which few non-farm options existed or had been created. From the 1940s to the mid-1980s, new lands were opened up and this helped deal with the population pressure, but by the 1980s, "these options were virtually exhausted" (Olson, 1994: 4). There was no new land to be opened up and farm sizes shrank to an average of 0.7 hectares. These young men had nothing to inherit and had few non-farm options. Until the economic restructuring, Habyarimana's regime had provided rural-based projects to absorb some of these youth, but all of these efforts disappeared with restructuring. Peasants also lost access to health care, to schooling and to other services which had been subsidized by the state.

## The Civil War and the Fictions of History and Ethnicity

Ironically, amidst this economic and political crisis the rich became much richer. Prominent among the richest of the rich were the military, government officials and the supporters of Habyarimana, most of whom were drawn from the north of Rwanda (Reyntjens, 1994: 33-34). Every region saw the growth of an elite which had fewer and fewer connections with the peasantry (Newbury, 1992). There was little will to deal with this crisis and few resources under economic restructuring to do so. One informant summed up this transformation succinctly when he said: "We, the elites, were so comfortable in those last years, running after the new things we could have for the first time, that we forgot about the problems of the poor" (M.K., February 1995).

The push for "democratization" took place in this context of economic crisis and of war. Like many a political demagogue before him, Habyarimana and factions of the elite used this crisis to foster extremism. They dealt with the unemployment crisis by arming this mass of disaffected youth. Each political party had its militias, especially in the urban areas, and the political arena was the new source of even more economic and social spoils. Multipartism was also linked to a very real push for democratic structures in Rwanda, but for too much of the elite multipartism became a struggle for spoils. This led to a greater pillaging of the economy, a growing debt and more disparity while the war helped fuel the "ethnic" rhetoric of the extremist parties. The growth of these parties under international pressure and scrutiny also gave the opposition a false sense of security in an atmosphere of economic crisis and extremism. An informant commented bitterly: "All that multipartism did was write the death lists" (I.B., December 1994). As discontent with the Hayarimana regime grew, so did the government propaganda, which stressed that the Tutsi were the enemy and the ancient oppressors of Rwanda.

## Interclass and Intraclass Violence and the Crisis

When Habyarimana's airplane went down on April 6, 1994, three things happened or did not happen: (1) most of the military stayed in its barracks waiting for the RPF; (2) the Presidential Guard and the *Interahamwe* (the MRND/CDR militias) went out to kill the opposition (the majority of whom were Hutu), the critics of the government (the majority of whom were Hutu) and Tutsi leaders; and, (3) other landless youth and the urban poor went rampaging through the rich neighbourhoods. The media coverage showed gangs roaming through the elite neighbourhoods, going door to door—looting, terrorizing, humiliating, killing—drunk on expensive liquor and carrying expensive goods. This makes little sense if they were only killing Tutsi, because most residents of those neighbourhoods were Hutu.

Discussing the events of the first three days with a number of Tutsi and Hutu who escaped from Kigali, it is striking how often both were threatened. As one man put it, "there was many a Hutu elite man on his knees in front of his Hutu gardener pleading for his life." This same man ran into the chauffeur from his department who told him proudly: "I'm rich now, boss, I've looted lots of houses!" (I.B., December 1994). Another Hutu family speaks of cowering in an interior corridor for three days because the mobs were running through the

neighbourhood. They left after the first three days because they decided that they "would rather die in the streets than like rats in the house." There is no doubt there was a difference in how Hutu and Tutsi were treated (non-political Hutu were terrorised while non-political Tutsi were killed) but, as Reyntjens argues, the socioeconomic aspects of the killings also should not be ignored (Reyntjens, 1994: 299).

The Presidential Guard and the *Interahamwe* killed as many of the enemies on their lists as they could find, and effectively neutralised the UN Peacekeeping Troops by torturing and killing the 10 Belgian peacekeepers guarding Agathe Uwilingiyimama, the southern Hutu Prime Minister. Two thousand plus peacekeepers were withdrawn from Rwanda. This gave the extremists a *carte blanche* to hunt down and kill opposition members and Tutsi in Kigali. However, after these first days, we also see an intensification of the call for the extermination of the Tutsi. I would argue that, as in the case of Kirinda, this renewed call was mounted to deflect and redirect the violence of the poor and young against the Tutsi and away from the rich Hutu elite. It was also used to mask the killing of the opposition.

There was also a pattern of using coercion to make others join in the killings or at least join in the gangs which targeted Tutsi for death (African Rights, 1994: 568-596; Mujawamariya, 1994: 8-9). As the killings gained momentum, the violence became more complex and less linked to purely political ends. There was outright robbery (African Rights, 1994: 577-583). Personal vendettas were settled. Property under dispute could be appropriated by one claimant from another on the basis of accusations (Reyntjens, 1994: 299). People who had excited the jealousy of their neighbours by being marginally more affluent were attacked. Moreover, as the crisis progressed, the killings became an end in themselves. And there is no question that genocide took place in Rwanda.

The reasons why this anti-Tutsi sentiment could be manipulated so successfully is based on both the precolonial and colonial history of Rwanda, and also the make up of the Rwandan Patriotic Front which was predominantly Tutsi, some drawn from the descendants of the aristocrats who fled Rwanda in 1959-63. The regime fostered by the Belgians was very rapacious and very corrupt and most of the peasantry was terrified by the prospect of its return. However, it is important to note that the vast majority of the Tutsi in Rwanda have been and remain poor peasants living in equivalent circumstances to their neighbours. Nonetheless, throughout this period, there was a deliberate use of ethnic violence for political ends, the killings were ordered from above and the majority carried out by the militias (African Rights, 1994; Human Rights Watch/Africa, 1994: 2-7; Mujawamariya, 1994: 36-52; Reyntjens, 1994: 298-299).

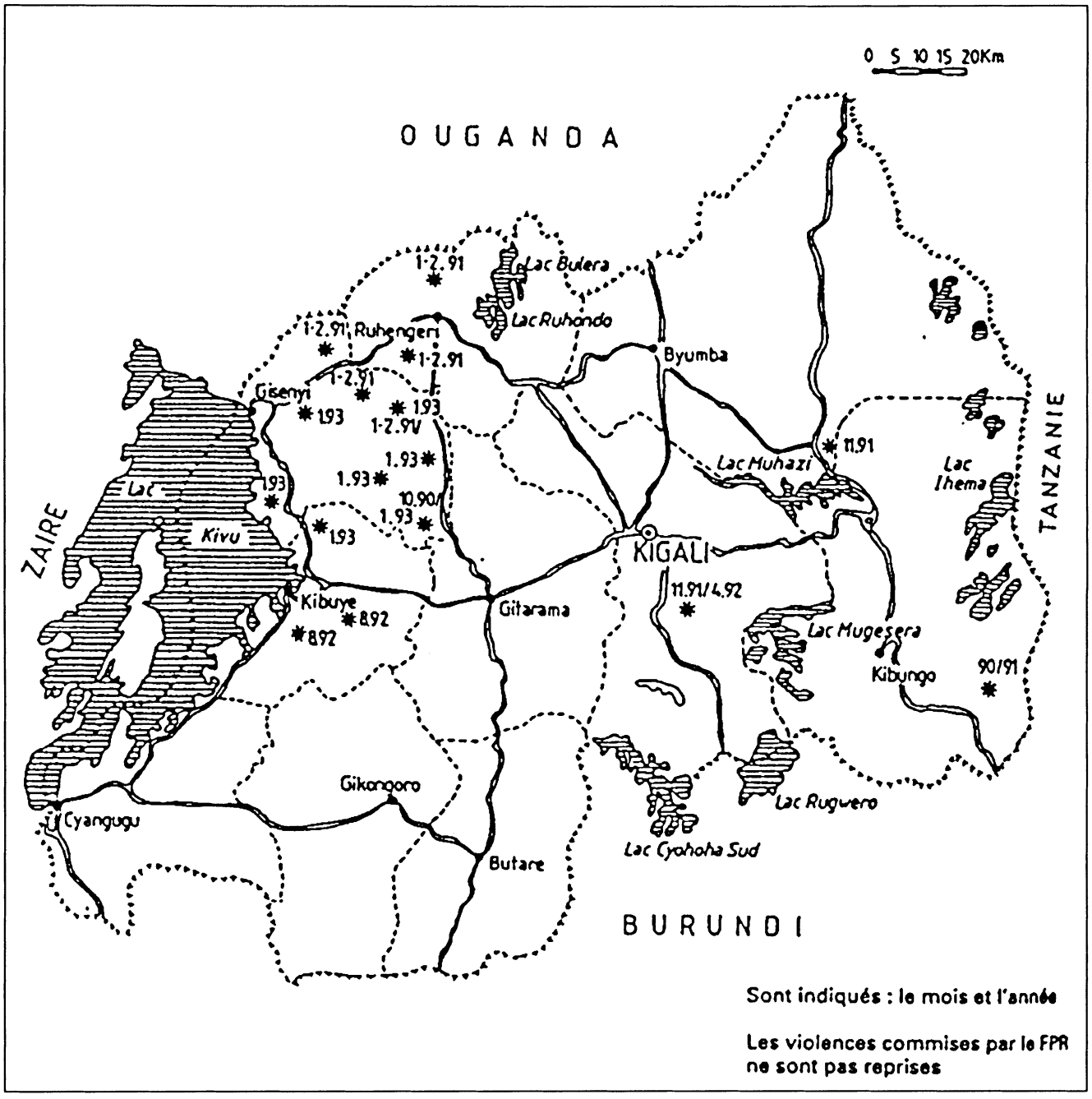
It should be stressed that, until 1990, the regime of Habyarimana did not use ethnic violence as a political tool. However, after the invasion of the RPF in 1990 this changed. There was a systematic use of ethnic violence between 1990 and 1993 which was escalated in April 1994 (Human Rights Watch/Africa, 1994; Reyntjens, 1994: 183-192). As in 1973, this process has been linked with the consolidation of power by a small elite and with regional politics (Reyntjens, 1994: 27-29).

## Regional Differences in the Genocide

If we consider the development of the genocide throughout the country (in the 1991-93 period and in 1994) we will see that the violence was neither spontaneous nor the result of "ancient hatreds." The killings did not erupt throughout the whole country, instead, many regions stayed calm through weeks of bloodshed. The killings, where they took place, were orchestrated by various elites and targeted different groups with different degrees of success throughout the country. Each region and areas within each region either resisted or became involved for different reasons.

Looking at the pattern of killings in the period between 1991-93, it can be seen that the major ethnic/political massacres and attacks were concentrated in Gisenyi, Ruhengeri and Kibuye (Figure 1). During the attacks of 1994 we see a similar pattern. The killings in Gisenyi, Ruhengeri and Cyangugu began almost simultaneously with the killings in Kigali. Soon after, Kibuye began the massacres. Kibungo was the scene of some of the most horrific killings during the genocide. The Bugesera region in Kigali Prefecture also had major massacres. Cyangugu (which had minor attacks between 1991-93) was the site of terrible attacks on Tutsi immediately after the airplane of the president was shot down. Butare and Giterama were effectively left alone between 1991-93 and resisted the call for genocide the longest (African Rights, 1994: 583-590; Mujawamariya, 1994: 6-9, 25-26, 43-44, 51; Pottier and Wilding, 1994: 23; Reyntjens, 1994: 183-192, 295-297). If we consider the social, historical and political context of this crisis, region by region, we can see that ethnic hatred is not the major factor.

**Figure 1**
**Rwanda: Principal Ethnic/Political Massacres or Attacks (1991-93)**




*Source:* Reyntjens, 1994: 186.

## The North: Fictions of Tradition

By the 1980s the main positions in Habyarimana's regime, as well as access to resources such as scholarships, were concentrated in the hands of elites from the prefectures of Ruhengeri and Gisenyi (Reyntjens 1994: 33-34). By April 1994 power was concentrated even further into the hands of certain members of Mme Habyarimana's family and certain members of the northern elite, the infamous "Akazu" (ibid.: 189). At the same time, this area had the highest population density in Rwanda, the greatest disparity in land holdings and a growing landless group. The land clientage which was at the root of this disparity was always justified as a "Hutu institution" predating Tutsi and colonial rule (Pottier, 1992: 3, 6-7). This area also had the lowest proportion of Tutsi in the country, because it had been only incorporated into the precolonial state during the last years of the 19th century

(Des Forges, 1986; C. Newbury, 1988; Vansina, 1962). The problem of landlessness and the growing gap between rich and poor potentially made this area the most explosive for the Habyarimana regime. The core of the extremists came from this area, and this extremism favoured the interests of the political elite. As the map shows, there was a pattern of "ethnic" massacres through this area during the 1990s. In April of 1994, this area provided the manpower to help hunt down and kill Tutsi in other regions of the country (African Rights, 1994; Human Rights Watch/Africa, 1994: 4; Mujawamariya, 1994).

## The East: The Frontier

The regions of Kibungo and Bugesera (in Kigali Prefecture) also saw some of the worst killing before and during the genocide. These areas were not as populated as either the Northern prefectures or the prefectures of Butare and Gitarama; however, they were a major area of in-migration and the site of much of the unsettled land in Rwanda before the 1990s (African Rights, 1994; Olson, 1994: 4; Reyntjens, 1994: 184). Many of the Tutsi who fled the persecutions of 1959-62, 1963 and 1973, settled into this area. During the 1980s and 1990s, many of the landless and jobless youth from the north moved into these areas looking for land. By the 1980s most of the unsettled land was occupied and this region could no longer absorb surplus population. During the 1990s the old established Tutsi and the in-migrant Hutu groups clashed for access to land and for power. Given this situation, the government targeted this area for extremist propaganda, for its campaign of killings in the 1990s and found fertile ground amongst the landless youth from the north for the militias (Mujawamariya, 1994: 43-44, 51-52; Reyntjens, 1994: 184-187).

## The Southwest: Cyangugu and Gikongoro

Cyangugu in the southwest of Rwanda also was the site of killings in 1991-93. There were also attempts to incite violence in 1991-92 in Gikongoro, but these were less successful. However, after October 1993 when Melchior Ndadaye was killed in Burundi, this changed and there were massacres in this prefecture (Reyntjens, 1994: 186-187). The *Préfet* (Governor) of Cyangugu, Emmanuel Bagambiki, had been implicated in massacres of Tutsi in Bugesera in 1992 and 1993 and had been involved in the killings of both Tutsi and Hutu opposition members in Cyangugu during 1993. As soon as Habyarimana's airplane was shot down, the killings began in both prefectures (African Rights, 1994: 227-231). The west of Cyangugu, near the Zaïrian border, was the worst area for killing outside of Kigali. As in the rest of the country, the witnesses interviewed in both prefectures dwelt on the role of extremist politicians, government functionaries, militias, soldiers and police in leading the killings (African Rights, 1994: 227-231, 289-292).

The "ancient hatreds" argument holds little water in this region, as C. Newbury documents, it was an area where the old Tutsi state had not consolidated power (C. Newbury, 1988). Pottier has suggested that the government fostered extremist politics and appointed an extremist *préfet* because of the strategic location of Cyangugu. It sits on a major route out of the country (Pottier, 1995).

## The Centre and South: Butare and Gitarama

If the "ethnic violence" and "ancient hatreds" arguments are to be borne out, then the centre of the old kingdom, the prefectures of Butare and Gitarama should have shown the greatest degree of violence. However, this was the area that most strongly resisted the orders to kill. It took until April 18 for the killings to start and, in the end, the *Interahamwe* and presidential guards had to be brought in from Kigali and the north to force people to kill. Butare and Gitarama were the centre of opposition to the northern dominated government, and the local government was dominated by opposition members, with the notable exception of certain communes (African Rights, 1994: 583-590, 231-232, 248; Mujawamariya, 1994). There was also less disparity in land distribution, more intermarriage between Tutsi and Hutu and much more contact between ethnic groups. Survivors spoke of the solidarity between Hutu and Tutsi, which needed to be destroyed in order that the killings could be effected (African Rights, 1994: 583-584; Mujawamariya, 1994). This solidarity, coupled with opposition to the killings by the *préfet*, meant that even extremist politicians and *Interahamwe* in the communes were not able to act on the orders to kill. It is only when the *préfet* was killed by the army that the killings began. Again, the political opposition, the people who refused to give the orders, or those who helped Tutsi escape were hunted down and killed along with the Tutsi (African Rights, 1994: 583-590, 231-258, 607-610; Mujawamariya, 1994).

## Violence and Political Manipulation

The orchestrated nature of the killings is shown graphically in the statements collected by African Rights. These statements also show how various Hutu functionaries tried to stop the killings only to be overridden and often killed (African Rights, 1994: 231-253, 607-617). More than anything, this ethnic violence represented a struggle between elites, as Josephine Mukandori, a survivor, tells us:

> In our sector [Kareba, Butare] and... in Ntyazo [Butare], Tutsis and Hutus fought together.... The Hutus who really fought on our side were the ordinary people, not the educated ones.... These ones who understood the politics of the attacks explained to the ordinary Hutus what was taking place and they began to desert us. (African Rights, 1994: 248)

She argues that the local population was able to hold out against the *Interahamwe* because the militias were only armed with machetes and clubs. The *Interahamwe* were only able to start killing once the soldiers arrived.

Throughout the country the so-called "spontaneous violence" can be shown to have been systematic and cold-blooded. It did not arise out of ancient hatreds, but through overt political manipulation, ruthlessly orchestrated by a morally bankrupt elite. Factors such as the growing landlessness, disparities between rich and poor, the ambitions of an increasingly ruthless elite losing their grip on power, regional politics and regional dynamics played a central role in the genocide and political slaughter. As Josephine Mukandori tells us "in the end the population lost" (ibid.: 248).

## The Rwandan Patriotic Front and Fictions of History and Ethnicity

The new government in Rwanda, formed by the Rwandan Patriotic Front, has concerns of establishing legitimacy which are similar to those of all the previous regimes. Where Habyarimana and Kayibanda wished to lay claims to having a "natural majority," and the Belgians lay claims to having access to "natural rulers," the crisis of identity facing the Rwandan Patriotic Front concerns membership and inclusiveness. This is a complex process. The extreme end of this process argues that there is no ethnic difference whatsoever, rather it is a misunderstood class term. As Johan Pottier points out, this leads to claims such as those put forward by an RPF captain that "If you have more than 10 cows you can become a Tutsi.... Hutu simply means 'servant' in our language. Somebody with lots of cows has the right to have servants. Tutsi just means rich" (Mudenge, interview, *The Guardian*, March 5, 1994, quoted in Pottier, 1994: 9). This is a claim I have also heard on many occasions. Mamdani notes the same process (1996: 6). The RPF claim that they wish to eradicate the use of these terms, however many Hutu to whom I speak remain sceptical, that scepticism being based on events in Burundi. As Lemarchand points out for Burundi, the lack of reference to the terms does not mean that they do not continue to have power and mean real discrimination in everyday life (1994: 10), nor has the lack of the terms stopped the army from massacring Hutu.

More commonly, the argument is put forward that the precolonial state was equitable and balanced and the exploitative elements entered it only under colonialism (Pottier, 1994). However, as I have shown, this argument is also far too simplistic. Rather the research on the history of precolonial Rwanda done in recent years shows an evolving complex state, in which there was a radical transformation in social relations and the meaning of ethnicity over a 350-year period. Further transformations took place under the Germans and the Belgians, and again under the "Hutu" republics, and this process continues under the RPF government.

## Power and the Fictions of Ethnicity, History and Ethnography

Clearly the spurious racial theories of the Belgian colonial period need to be thrown into the dustbin of history where they belong, but the debate surrounding the precolonial state and the ways in which it has been presented still needs to be understood in context. David Newbury delineates the conflicting views of "being Rwandan" which existed in the precolonial state. He shows the roots of these conflicting views in a discourse amongst the Central Court which "both sought to expand territorially and to consolidate its power internally" (D.S. Newbury, 1995: 12). Accordingly, the Court rhetoric encompassed both a conception in which a ritually sanctioned and seperate elite held power in a clearly defined hierarchy, with distinct customs and rituals, and a vision of a single Rwandan identity which included all Kinyarwanda speakers. The various fictions of history and ethnicity which this article has considered incorporate alternative and competing views of what it constitutes to "be Rwandan."

The history of Rwanda is far more complex than the various fictions that have been explored would lead us to believe. It is a history of a state which changed over time

and was in the process of rapid transition at the advent of European colonialism. Both reciprocity and exploitation characterized a wide variety of relations in this complex state. Ethnicity was not invented by the Belgians, but a racial ideology was imposed on these categories. Most of the simplistic formulations and debates which characterize the state as benign hierarchy or viciously exploitative deny the complex and evolving nature of power, state and ethnicity in the 500 years preceding colonialism in Rwanda. This work has shown how, beginning in the precolonial period for the purposes of empire building, intensifying and transmuting under the Belgian colonial period to legitimate the structures of colonial rule, to validate the racial theories of that regime and to increase the power of the local aristocracy, undergoing further transformation under the first and second republic in order to justification of the exclusion and persecution of certain groups and altering again under the current government to legitimate new structures of power, the rewriting of history has been a major academic and political project in Rwanda.

## Notes

1 See D.S. Newbury, 1994, for a comprehensive look at the various proposed Rwandan dynastic chronologies.

2 The Tutsi central state practised indirect rule, so that many of the chiefs who held power were Hutu, especially in the Northwest (Des Forges, 1972).

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