Whose Denial?: Enduring Fears Under Rwanda’s Unity and Reconciliation Project

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ABSTRACT

In the political violence literature, denial is often called the final stage of genocide as many alleged perpetrators deny the effort to eradicate a victim group. In the years following Rwanda’s genocide, denial takes a different form, namely denial by the state that old schisms persist in Rwandan society. Is the state performance of justice and truth-seeking obscuring unfavourable and unexpected developments at the local level? What fears persist in the post-genocide period against the background of state proclamations of stability, unity, and reconciliation?

Denial in Post-Genocide Contexts

In the political violence literature, denial is called the final stage of genocide. Gregory Stanton (1996) and Miller and Touryan Miller (1993), among others, have argued that there are seven stages of genocide which are followed by this eighth and final stage. Denial here is treated as the final act of violence against the victim group, as the perpetrating state denies its crimes, and eliminates evidence of massacres by destroying mass graves and historical records. These states might contest the appropriateness of the legal definition of genocide to describe their actions, or argue that they were in engaged in civil war and not genocide, meaning that the victims themselves were a threat, and therefore had it coming. In light of the idea that denial is the final stage, Rwanda’s 1994 genocide complicates and raises questions around this common understanding of post-genocide denial.

What is interesting about Rwanda’s genocide is that denial as outlined by Stanton and others is not terribly prominent. Unlike in other incidences of genocide1, in Rwanda, state denial does not concern disavowing what happened in the past. The current Government of National Unity as it is known, while officially billed as a coalition government of formerly warring factions, is in reality led by the Rwandan Patriotic Front who are credited

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with ending the genocide in July 1994. So in fact, the Rwandan government makes efforts to draw attention to the events of the early 1990s through commemorations and the public nature of its multi-level judicial processes for trying suspected genocide criminals. Taken together, the legal, political, and, to a lesser extent, social strategies for redressing past violence in Rwanda are known as the movement toward national unity and reconciliation.

In addition, many individuals accused of involvement in the genocide are not denying their crimes. I will return shortly to the problems posed by these widespread confessions by alleged perpetrators and the fears that are born from them, but for now what I want to point out is that many are not denying their crimes as Stanton and others might presume they would. Locally and globally speaking, Rwanda’s genocide is well-documented and widely recognized as the attempt to eradicate a clearly defined victim group. So in light of both the state and individuals’ willingness to use the term genocide, what form does denial take in post-genocide Rwanda?

While all the more traditional forms of denial outlined by Stanton have not been entirely absent in post-genocide Rwanda, another more prominent form of denial there complicates his understanding of it. In Rwanda, denial centers not on the past, but on the present and future of the country. With special reference to semi-traditional local tribunals called gacaca courts that have been revived to try genocide suspects in Rwanda, this paper considers an alternative form of post-genocide denial by the state and the fears engendered well after the campaign to eradicate the victim group has ended.

I argue that denial is part and parcel of the national project of unity and reconciliation, of which gacaca courts are only a part. In Rwanda, state denial takes the form of refusal to adequately acknowledge that the divisions which culminated in the 1994 genocide have not been eliminated and that people still find them personally and politically significant. In the interests of unity and reconciliation, the state has declared it virtually illegal to identify as either a Muhutu or Mututsi. Everyone is simply Rwandan now, so the discourse goes. Now the terms have subtly shifted to those of survivors, or victims, and perpetrators, or accused, but everyone knows that these terms echo the opposition of Mututsi to Muhutu. Moreover, locally-speaking, everyone still knows to which group everyone else used to belong. This means that the erasure of these categories from public discourse does not work to erase the significant role they have played historically and how they have shaped personal and collective identity. Therefore, the unity and reconciliation movement fails to articulate with everyday concerns and the barriers to stability that persist in Rwanda’s post-genocide social order, which results in continuing fears among people in Rwanda today. The rest of this paper is devoted to exploring the sources of those fears and delineating further lines of inquiry around the subtleties of post-genocide denial.

The Unity and Reconciliation Project in Rwanda: Gacaca Tribunals

The local level, “semi-traditional” courts called gacaca were revived in 2001 in response to a state prison system overwhelmed by the volume of genocide suspects. gacaca trans-
lates roughly to “justice on the grass,” as it was outdoors that these courts have historically convened. The courts are intended to bring victims and accused together with the general public in order to punish the guilty, do justice to victims, and vindicate innocent prisoners. So there was a strong expectation that gacaca would be a collaborative and therapeutic process which would help to bring people back together and alleviate uncertainty through testimony, witnessing, and truth-telling. In a way these tribunals combine elements of truth commissions and trials: a key goal is reconstructing what happened during the genocide, but these tribunals are also vested with judicial authority to punish where necessary. The mission statement for gacaca courts uses the language of “mending the tissues of society” in order to foster social cohesion. It is billed as a participatory process to restore justice which involves the entire community, not just the parties directly implicated in a dispute. This is considered particularly important in light of the way the 1994 genocide was carried out. Because the massacres entailed extensive civilian participation, officials think it is vital that judicial processes should also be community-based (National Service of gacaca Jurisdictions 2004). But the involvement of the entire community is not taking the form that officials had intended, and these unplanned consequences are not part of the supposedly open dialogue about the past and future of the country. In fact, that public participation is a fundamental component of the gacaca process has turned out to be both something for which it is widely praised and one of its greatest detriments.

For example, during my fieldwork in southern Rwanda in 2004, people expressed to me that two “camps” are emerging around gacaca -- the victims and the accused -- and that each side’s conduct vis-à-vis the other is not always rooted in the pursuit of truth and justice as conceptualized by the state. Sometimes community members collude to prevent condemning evidence from coming to light so that a guilty person can go free. By contrast, some particularly vengeful individuals have been known to make suspects appear guilty, or guilty of more severe crimes than they committed in order to punish as many prisoners as possible. Even though everyone knows that many Bahutu were killed for refusing to participate in the genocide, survivors sometimes presume suspects are guilty if they are still alive.

Pre-emptive killings have also been a problem since the revival of gacaca. Potential witnesses are being killed by the accused or members of their families to prevent those witnesses from testifying. Naturally, then, many people fear testifying: they are afraid of attracting new enemies by sending a neighbor to prison (Karekezi, Nshimiyimana and Mutumba 2004:79). But they are also afraid not to testify for fear that they will be betraying lost family members and neighbors. In this way, old divisions get reinforced and consolidated, as witnesses tend to act according to old loyalties.

Finally, even the confessions by the guilty cannot be trusted, as many people suspect that the guilty confess in order to be handed lighter sentences. This demonstration of remorse in exchange for shorter prison terms or community service has become a standard component of the judicial proceedings and re-integration of convicted genocide criminals...
back into their communities. By performing the role of the remorseful confessor, many genocide criminals are “getting off too easy” in the eyes of many survivors.

So in other words, gacaca courts, instead of “mending the tissues of society,” have consolidated Rwanda’s pre-existing divisions around efforts to see a prisoner punished or help them to escape it. That everyone knows that such divisions persist, but that they cannot be expressed publicly, is a source of daily fear and anxiety. Social and political divisions in post-genocide Rwanda take on the character of what Michael Taussig has called “public secrets,” what everyone knows but dares not speak about in the public sphere (Green 1995:119), meaning that people must take care to “know what not to know” (Taussig 1999). What all of this suggests is that the entire enterprise of gacaca as the pursuit of justice and the prevention of a culture of impunity is undermined by the unexpected ways that people are using these local-level venues to manipulate the judicial process for their own interests and agendas. This hijacking of local judicial proceedings and the fears that are engendered by it continue against the background of state proclamations of unity, stability, and justice.

Denial and Fear in Post-Genocide Rwanda

In recent years, anthropologists and other cultural theorists have increasingly opened up discussion around political violence, genocide, and how states attempt to redress collective violence. A number of them have addressed these politics of post-conflict periods in ways that help to think through the issues I have raised around post-genocide Rwanda. Derrida has described Algeria’s post-conflict period in a way which aptly characterizes Rwanda’s too. He says: “...despite the infinite suffering of the victims, and the irreparable harm they suffer for ever, one can certainly think that the survival of the country, the society, the state is coming about by the process of announced reconciliation” (2001:50).

It is true of Rwanda, too, that on the surface, unity and reconciliation processes appear to be achieving their goals. As Veena Das and Arthur Kleinman point out, social life following periods of terror may look ‘normal’ from the outside, but such normality belies ongoing suffering. The memory of violence does not disappear and neither does the desire to have those experiences and on-going concerns taken seriously (2001:15). Derrida’s concept of “announced reconciliation” is useful for thinking about the gaps between the state project of unity and reconciliation, and the ways that schisms persist at the interpersonal and community levels. His point is that it is important to be critical of these state proclamations, and he claims instead that reconstituting social relations has no temporal endpoint. This means that the country must be reflexive about its failures as well as its successes. It is exactly state proclamations of unity that propagate fear well into the post-genocide period because of the restrictions on what is thinkable and sayable in public spaces, coupled with the violent crimes that continue in the background with little in the way of state intervention to protect citizens. How can Rwandans express their fears about continued divisions
in their society and communities if the state labels subversive and problematic the very expression of such concerns in a public manner?

In Paul Ricoeur’s words, views and experiences that oppose the official line of how the country is reconciling are forced into an “unhealthy underground existence” (2004:455). He says that the public sphere is deprived of dissenting views when “imaginary unity” (2004:455) is substituted for confronting persistent divisions. Such substitution is a dangerous thing according to Ricoeur, because it undermines the important work of memory that allows social actors to think through their experiences of collective violence. When the state makes exhortations to forget in the name of peace-making, and when its interpretations of history fail to articulate with individual and collective memory, the unity project lacks credibility. As a result it is difficult, if not impossible for the public to take seriously the movement to forge national solidarity. In other words, Ricoeur sees abuses of memory and of forgetting in these contexts, as there is too much forgetting by the state in its denial of persistent social divisions (2004:448).

The exception to this excess of forgetting in Rwanda is the second week of April each year when the annual week of mourning for the genocide takes place. During this time, Ricoeur would argue that there is instead too much memory encouraged by the state, which is equally problematic when it comes to genuine peace-making and confronting a violent past (2004:85-6). But even and perhaps especially during this week, it is still unacceptable to speak of persisting divisions in Rwandan society: the week of mourning is meant for all Rwandans, and people are expected to gather together to view films about the genocide, and attend commemorative events and conferences to reflect on the country’s past. With the state denial of social divisions and the insistence that gacaca trials and other aspects of unity and reconciliation are working relatively smoothly, so fears persist as no one feels able to express their anxieties about the present and future of their country and, even more pressingly, their personal safety.

Post- Genocide Denial Reconsidered

As the current Rwandan government performs the project of unity and reconciliation, and publicly proclaims the successes it is having in “mending the tissues of society,” it simultaneously commits an act of denial regarding the schisms that persist in post-genocide Rwanda. I do not mean to suggest that the Rwandan government deserves no credit for its efforts to establish greater stability for the country, only that, publicly at least, it focuses too much on its successes and fails to be sufficiently reflexive about its remaining challenges. The re-entrenching of social and political divisions through the process of the gacaca tribunals has been an unexpected result of the project of national unity, but the state prefers downplay it, along with the fears and anxiety that are part of many Rwandans’ most pressing concerns.

What Rwanda’s post-genocide history demonstrates is the importance of complicating our understandings of the obstacles to stability following collective violence. State-level projects including judicial processes, and shifting the terms of national belonging, are insufficient to overcome deeply entrenched animosities rooted in memory, history, and
identity. Post-genocide denial as outlined by Stanton and others is an important concept for understanding the subsequent acts of non-physical violence that constitute attacks on individual and collective memory. But the concept of denial ought not be limited to disavowing past events. Instead it needs to be reconsidered to include the silencing mechanisms which obscure persisting divisions in post-genocide society and engender fear around these unspeakable subjects. Post-genocide denial considered in this way demonstrates a point that cannot be overlooked: that the state-level project of national unity is just as much a project of social engineering as any genocide ideology. Both rely on state discourses about what constitutes a good society, who belongs in it, and who should be excluded. It is the shift from emphasizing exclusion to emphasizing inclusion and finding ways to legitimate that shift in the eyes of the public that is one of the principal challenges for a movement to forge common ground following a sustained period of collective violence.

Notes

1. For example, the Armenian genocide of 1915 and Turkish denial thereafter, or the presence of former Nazis in the German government after the Nazi genocide who maintained that there had been no campaign to eradicate the victim groups.
2. This is not the case for the officials who planned and executed the genocide: they tend to deny their genocide crimes altogether because pleading guilty will not get them a lighter sentence the way it does for those accused of “lesser” crimes, (i.e. participation in killing or destroying property).
3. Contrary to common usage, Tutsi and Hutu are not nouns, but adjectives. In Kinyarwanda, the prefixes mu- and ba- denote the singular and plural forms of nouns which refer to human beings. In other words, Muhutu and Mututsi are the singular forms of these nouns, while Bahutu and Batutsi are the correct plural forms.
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