

# “Ethnic” violence in Rwanda and Burundi doesn’t mean that Hutus and Tutsis are ethnic groups

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**Prior to colonialism, you could be one or the other based on socioeconomic status. But after that, you were born Hutu or Tutsi and it remained that way, which wasn’t the case before.**



In January 2014, the BBC Gahuza Miryango Programme hosted a series of shows on the origins of the Hutus and Tutsis, whether they were ethnic groups that existed prior to colonialism or whether they were socioeconomic classes. Pan-African Review has transcribed what it considers a profound con-

tribution on the subject in the exchange below between the host Mr. Ally Yusuf Mugenzi and a Burundian academic, Prof. Jean Bosco Manirambona.

**Mr. Mugenzi:** You said you did research on the subject as your PhD dissertation in Belgium. You say that even though there’s violence between Hutus and Tutsis, it doesn’t mean they are ethnic groups. In Rwanda, there was genocide, and they say identity cards had a role in distinguishing people. In Burundi, they never had ethnicity on their identity cards but they see the problem of ethnicity and when violence starts, they know how to distinguish Hutus from Tutsis. You say there’s no ethnicity, how is that possible Doc?

**Prof. Manirambona:** The period between 1924 and 1934 changed history. The colonial power, Belgium, undertook profound administrative reforms in Burundi and Rwanda. Before that, nobody was born Tutsi or Hutu. A person was born Umuhanza, Umwega, Umunyiginya, Umushubi, Umucyaba, or Umunyakarama. Those were family or clan identities (amoko).

Today amoko (identity) has changed meaning. In addition to those identities, one could be a Hutu or Tutsi depending on his or her socioeconomic status. During my research I interviewed elders. I asked them “What’s your identity?” Those above 80 answered “We are Abajiji, Abahanza, Abanyakarama, etc”. Then I would ask their sons the same question. They would respond “we are Tutsis” or “we are Hutus”. Then I would ask the elders, “How is it possible that you, the parents, have different identities from your children?” They would say that the children were born under a new governance regime (abo nabo kungoma nshasha), meaning the colonial order.

Something else surprised me. Some of the respondents above 80 years said: “We were Hutus twice then Tutsis 3 times.” Others would say, “We were Tutsis three times and we are now Hutus.” I asked them what this means. A Tutsi was someone of economic means. Since surplus wasn’t for the market, this was someone who could provide for themselves and still have something to give to others (Umuntu ufite ibyo arya nibyo aha abandi). A Hutu was someone under conditions of economic dependency. A person who depended on another for his livelihood. More interestingly, anyone could be a Hutu and a Tutsi at once. In that case, you were a Hutu to the person from whom you expected patronage and a Tutsi towards the person you extended favours (Yari umuhutu imbere yuwo asaba; akongera akaba umututsi imbere yuwo yagabiye). That’s how society was organised.

Since 1933, in Rwanda, there were adminis-

trative reforms that changed history and institutions. One colonial report says: Anyone below 10 cows was made Hutu; above 10, Tutsi. Since then, people began to be born as Tutsis and others as Hutus with new identities. But surprisingly, they kept parents who were neither Hutu nor Tutsi in ethnic terms. Moreover, people who were born as Tutsi or Hutu still kept their clan identities (Igitangaje, bagumanye ya miryango).

During those colonial reforms, parents with three or five children could have some of their children made Hutus and others made Tutsis depending on the number of cows they (the children) possessed. The word Hutu/Tutsi is found in the region of Buyogoma, Kirimiro, Buyenzi and Mugamba. It wasn’t in the whole of Burundi. All Burundians were not categorized into Hutus and Tutsis. They became so later. One example is the region of Imbo alongside Lake Tanganyika. The people there were called Abasasi. If you ask elders and people from the region of Buragane, they tell you that they are Abasasi; they are neither Tutsi nor Hutus. At the time, Belgians would impose a general rule and upon that they would decree “These are Hutus, and these are Tutsis,” and it remained so.

## Divide and Rule

What caused conflict was that those who became Tutsi were the ones given the privilege/opportunity to go to school, both in Rwanda and Burundi. When you look at the census of people who studied at Astrida (Burundians, Rwandans, Congolese), you find

that Tutsis were about 90%. The kids of chiefs who studied there, who had been made Tutsis but had Hutu siblings, became administrators. In hierarchical terms, they were only subordinate to white colonial administrators. So, what is the root cause of the conflict between Hutus and Tutsis? It's the fact that a section of Banyarwanda and Barundi was promoted/ privileged (badugijwe) by the colonial power at the expense of others, making them become leaders in politics, the army, and the administration; while others were marginalized. Wars and violence occurred. Why? Some want to keep these privileges (with dubious roots/justification, sometimes justified as "tradition"); others reject it and say we also must get our share. War is the result.

When, among siblings, some eat and the others don't, there will be a sibling rivalry. Siblings might even begin to kill each other. The fact that you are related doesn't matter in the context of sibling rivalry.

**Mr. Mugenzi:** What then is the origin of the words Hutu and Tutsi?

**Prof. Manirambona:** Before Europeans came, the words Hutu and Tutsi were used. A Tutsi was someone who could provide for themselves and could extend favours to others. Someone with fertile land, with many cows (amatungo). Those words, Hutu and Tutsi, are only common in the regions of Burundi that I have told you about. In the central plateau, in Kirimiro, all the way across that belt to Butare in Rwanda, people used them. But if you go to Rwanda, people in Cyangugu or Abakiga don't call themselves Hutu or Tutsi. They call themselves Abakiga.

The words Hutu/Tutsi have remained, but their meanings and applications have significantly changed. It means that before colonialism you could be one or the other based on socioeconomic status. But after that, you were born Hutu or Tutsi and it remained that way, which wasn't the case before.

Similarly important, when a Twa who made a living as a hunter and gatherer adopted a sedentary life-style, he became Hutu. When his fortune grew, had what to eat and surplus to give others, he became a Tutsi. If that Tutsi acquired political power (ubutegetsi bwa poilitik), he became Umuganwa (Prince), but not the kind from the lineage of Umwami (King) (Mugabo atari uwo munda y'umwami). In other words, wealth was also a path to aristocratic power.

When such a prince retired, he became Tutsi. When he faced the misfortune and his wealth was lost, he became a Hutu. But he wouldn't be a Mutwa again because he had become sedentary. So, before the colonial order, there was no conflict between Tutsis and Hutus. It came after. It was mainly due to the injustice Belgians decreed to a section of Rwandans and Burundians. Those who were favoured (abatoneshejwe) invested in it (bakabihagararaho). The marginalized were resentful. Then elections for independence and political parties came; the rising polarization brought about conflict and the colonial power exploited that. Hutus and Tutsis in terms of ethnicity are a Belgian creation. I call it socioeconomic groups.

**Mr. Mugenzi:** Were there taboos associated with the Hutu and Tutsi classifications, such as the claim that some were not allowed

to do particular things?

**Prof. Manirambona:** In my research, what we call taboos (“imiziro”), or even anything that distinguishes a group from another such as totems, is associated with clans. There are no taboos or totems associated with Hutu or Tutsi.

As an example, some of the people we call Tutsi Banyaruguru (comprising abanyakarama, abenengwe, abanyagisaka) didn’t marry in Bahima families. There are also clans like Abahanza and Abajiji who didn’t marry someone from Bahima clans or in other clans.

Further, there are no myths (Icyivugo) specific to Hutu or Tutsi. But there are myths common to clans, such as “umuhanza umuhizi adahizana kwijambo”; or icyivugo cyumujiji atajijana ku ngoma.

With regard to the question of marriage, imagine someone has two children. One of them is successful and becomes a chief for up to ten generations. The other is a servant and does manual work with serious hardships. After ten generations, the children of the first child will never admit that they are related to the other person whose family faces hardships. This also happened between families and clans. When you happen to be a Tutsi able to provide for yourself and extend favours, those who labour in your household or clan could not marry your daughter. It’s about status. Generally, people want to marry their children to those in the same status category. In the past when looking for a wife, they would look for fertile land (ahantu hazava igiseke) or a household where there were many cows (ahantu hataha

inka). So, this is why if some looked down on others to the point where they refused to marry them, it was primarily due to disparities in economic standing, as a person sought a wife from a family with which they could form a partnership and alliance that would help them grow.

**Mr. Mugenzi:** A caller said that he knows many people in his neighbourhood in Rwanda who were called Abahutu but had cows and some Tutsis who were called Abatutsi but who had no cows; they were agriculturalists but were called Abatutsi

**Prof. Manirambona:** The colonial paradigm mixed two things. In addition to one’s property (amatungo umuntu afise), they considered physical features such as the nose. An explorer called Speke (John) arrived from Uganda and saw people who looked like Ethiopians. He said these people must have originated from Ethiopia. Oscar Boman relied on this. Different writers, such as Monsignor Léon-Paul Classe in Rwanda, Monsignor Gorge in Burundi, and Reverend Father Alexis Kagame relied on Speke’s observations. Alex Kagame wrote that Tutsis came from Abyssinia and that, when they arrived in Rwanda and Burundi, the autochthones who they met there called them Abatutsi. But here is the problem: if they were called Tutsis, then it most likely means that the word already existed among the autochthones. If it existed before they came, what did it mean?

Secondly, using archaeology, language, culture, and political institutions as reference points, you notice that in Kenya or Ethiopia, no one is called a Tutsi. In Uganda, above

Bunyoro and Busoga, in the territory of Itesot and Karamojong and the Luo, there's no one called a Tutsi. The issue is this: at the scientific level there's no trace at all showing the migration of people from Abyssinia. From this observation, I asked myself: "Did those people migrate from Abyssinia and no one was so exhausted by the journey that they remained behind and were called this name, Tutsi? This is also a strong indication that the word Tutsi does not originate from elsewhere.

Also, to say they came from Abyssinia means they should have had a language of their own. Monsignor Gorge said that they lost that language over centuries of socialization, that they forgot it. Reverend Father

Alex Kagame also says they forgot it. But which language is it that they lost?

Counterexamples are the Luhya of Kenya and the smaller Nilotics groups around them. None of the Nilotic languages became extinct. We have languages in Namibia and Tanzania that are spoken by the smallest groups that survived. So, it's difficult to explain how, from Bunyoro, Busoga down to Buha and beyond, the entire region is inhabited by Bantu speakers only. If Tutsi had truly originated from Abyssinia, they would have a language specific to their group.

**Mr. Mugenzi:** So, it's a socioeconomic class.

**Prof Manirambona:** A socioeconomic class.