A nation without ethnicity: particular case of Rwandan reconciliation model

The devastating genocide against the Tutsi claimed the lives of more than 800,000 Tutsi, moderate Hutu, and Twa people in Rwanda in 1994. Since then, the post-genocide government of Rwanda has embarked upon a unique and ambitious nation-rebuilding and reconciliation program which has restructured the social and physical landscape through modern development initiatives and “homegrown” solutions to reconciliation and national unity. Some of these solutions include gacaca community-based courts to try genocide suspects, a monthly community service day called umuganda, and ingando camps which aim to re-educate Rwandans on issues of history, unity, and civics. Many of these approaches to unity and reconciliation allege a rootedness in traditional Rwandan culture and claim to provide opportunities for participation among all citizens.

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Though Rwanda is often touted as a model for development in Africa, the post-genocide government has been criticized by human rights groups, academics, journalists, and others as authoritarian and repressive, citing a lack of free speech, mysterious deaths and disappearances of political opponents, arbitrary detentions, and a severely constricted political space. Yet, Rwanda’s peacebuilding and reconciliation efforts are often lauded by the international community as unique, experimental, and ultimately successful.

Perhaps most unconventional in transitional justice and social reconciliation policies is the prohibiting of ethnic identification in contemporary Rwandan society. Rwandans are now taught
that Hutu, Tutsi, and Twa ethnicity was imposed by Belgian colonials who sought to divide a previously harmonious Rwanda which was stratified not by ethnicity, but by socio-economic status and wealth in cows. Laws against ethnic divisionism were passed in 2001 and are enshrined in the 2003 constitution through various articles outlawing forms of discrimination and “divisionism,” though this term is not well defined.

Punishment for breaking these laws include lengthy prison sentences and hefty fines. Further, the government refuses to recognize the existence of special categories of the population on the basis that it is “divisionist.” Instead, the state promotes ndi umunyarwanda ("I am Rwandan") or Rwandan nationality as the only acceptable identity and asserts that tightly managed political and identity-based discourse is necessary for security.

The Twas: the historically marginalized people

For Rwanda’s Indigenous Twa community, numbering around 30,000, this means that they cannot legally or publicly identify as Twa and that their Indigenous identity is not recognized by the government. This effectively prevents them from making claims to rights, resources, or representation based on their identity as an Indigenous or ethnic minority. Instead, the Twa are referred to as the “Historically Marginalized People” and often live in ethnically isolated villages as pottery makers or day laborers with limited access to basic needs. They have faced generations of ethnic stigma, discrimination, extreme poverty, and now an inability to articulate or receive help for their unique needs and challenges.

Many Twa previously lived in or near the forested areas of Rwanda as hunters, gatherers, and artisans from precolonial times up until Rwanda’s independence from Belgium in 1962. From the post-independence years through the early 1990s, waves of fortress conservation and development efforts evicted the Twa from their ancestral forests and pushed them onto the literal and metaphoric margins of Rwandan society. They were not compensated for the land and livelihoods they lost and were offered no targeted support to shift to a sedentary, cash-based village life.
Approximately 10,000 Twa – one third of the entire Twa population in Rwanda - lost their lives during the genocide. This community suffered tremendously during the genocide and in the years after. Those who survived were not allowed to participate in reconciliation efforts, including ingando reeducation camps or gacaca traditional courts, and were not eligible for any survivors’ benefits because only Tutsi are officially recognized as genocide survivors. The transitional justice strategy of eliminating ethnic and other identity categories dislocates the Twa from their ethnic and Indigenous identity and forecloses upon identity-based claims to land, rights, and resources.

The Twa are only recognized as Rwandan citizens, an identity which grants them entitlement to compensation, but requires no consent or inclusion in decision-making processes. As one of the most socio-economically disadvantaged and vulnerable groups in Rwanda, Twa face ongoing challenges such as discrimination, extreme poverty, unemployment, and poor access to health care and education. The vast majority are landless and struggle to meet their basic needs.

**The ancestral forests of the Twa: from dispossession to gorilla tourism**

The forested areas became national parks whose land and biodiversity are now protected through militarized fortress conservation. The tourism-generating national parks offer visitors guided tours to see mountain gorillas, chimpanzees, and golden monkeys, however the Twa are almost never hired as guides or porters and hardly benefit from tourism activities in their area.

Instead, any Twa person found entering the national parks was labeled a poacher and faced significant fines and jail time if caught. The montane tropical forests of some of Rwanda’s national parks provided shelter and a path to safety for some Twa during periods of violence leading up to and during the genocide of 1994. Their ability to expertly navigate the dense forest terrain allowed many Twa to escape the country or hide in the forests. Many Twa communities experienced ethnically targeted violence, though they rarely got involved in any ethnic or political conflict prior to the genocide.
The borders of Volcanoes National Park (VNP), home of the famed mountain gorillas studied by Dian Fossey, is home to many Twa families who were previously evicted from the forests of VNP. An expansion project for VNP is currently underway to provide more space for the growing mountain gorilla population and associated tourist activities. Tourism, especially that generated by gorilla trekking, is one of Rwanda’s largest external revenue generating sources. As a result of the proposed expansion, thousands of people may be displaced, many of whom are Twa living on the borders of the park. Additional crises of land scarcity and depletion, large-scale industrialized agriculture, and forced villagization makes the situation of Twa even more concerning.

International conservation organizations operating in the area of VNP have aimed to educate stakeholders on Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) in the planning stages of the park expansion, as the Indigenous Twa’s current and ancestral lands will be affected by the project. However, Rwandan authorities claim that they are under no obligation to gain consent from the Twa for the expansion of VNP because they are not recognized as an Indigenous group and therefore not entitled to FPIC.

**Self-identification as a form of “ethnic divisionism”**

Rwanda is a state party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the International Covenant on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD), the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (CESCR), the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights (ACHPR), and other relevant regional and international human rights charters. However, as a state party to ICCPR, CERD, and ACHPR – which emphasize self-identification as primary criteria for who constitutes a minority or Indigenous group regardless of State recognition – Rwanda’s refusal to recognize the Twa as “Twa” or as Indigenous is confounding. The government of Rwanda doesn’t deny that the Twa constitute a minority and admits that they meet the criteria for Indigenous identification, yet they are refused Indigenous recognition on the grounds that it creates “divisionism” within the Rwandan population which is outlawed in the constitution.
Transitional justice and reconciliation policies have understandably been put into place to prevent the dangerous ethnic division and rhetoric which contributed to violence leading up to and during the genocide. Yet, the consequences for the Twa have been profound. The Twa are absent from the official version of Rwandan history and are largely excluded from the reconciliation and nation-building efforts the country has made since the genocide. They cannot assert themselves with any distinction in the broader socio-political landscape of Rwanda. They cannot make claims to protections, resources, or rights based on their identity.

The Rwandan government asserts that every citizen, regardless of ethnicity, religion, region, or other identity-related category, is afforded the same rights and protections. However, many Twa still suffer ethnic discrimination which has stereotyped them as “unintelligent” and “uncivilized” and have difficulties exercising their basic rights. NGOs dedicated to the Twa have faced legal trouble when trying to advocate on behalf of this community because targeting one ethnic group is considered “divisionism.” These organizations often must find ways to help the Twa through other means, such as advocating on behalf of pottery makers – a craft commonly associated with Twa identity.

The legislated elimination of ethnic and Indigenous identification in Rwanda prevents targeted affirmative action and prevents the collection of disaggregated data. This negatively impacts the ability to monitor discrimination and inequality, as well as track demographic change over time, estimate needs, monitor and evaluate programs, identify gaps, and plan future projects. The lack of disaggregated data renders invisible many of the struggles faced by Twa people in Rwanda and makes it difficult to prove cases of discrimination or highlight the unique challenges this community faces. The lack of recognition of the Twa as a distinct and underserved Indigenous minority does not prevent, and is counter-productive to ending, the many challenges they face.

The denial of representational sovereignty and insistence upon only a national identity may be enacted in pursuit of unity and reconciliation, however the results are uneven and exclusionary of marginal identities. Like so many others in Rwanda, the Twa are forced to articulate their
experiences and histories within an approved language to fit the parameters of allowed terminology and narratives. They are no longer Twa, they are Historically Marginalized People; they were not hunters, they are poachers; they may not access the forest, they are trespassing; they are not Indigenous, they are Rwandan. For the Twa, Rwanda’s pursuit of a “non-ethnic” nation is a series of complex acts of dispossession, displacement, and Indigenous erasure.

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