

Topic: Contested Heritage and the Politics of the Past in Africa

Archaeology and the Rwandan Genocide

The Rwandan genocide was built on a lie about ethnicity. But how true is the story invented to encourage reconciliation? And can the hunt for the Rwanda's real prehistory disturb that effort?

The colonial period saw an elaborate fiction created to explain Rwanda's past. The 19th and early 20th century Europeans encountered a society that divided its people into three social groups. Based on the theories of race biology the Europeans brought with them, they saw a Rwanda (and Burundi) settled by successive migratory groups at different stages of human evolution: first, the pygmy Twa hunter-gatherers, followed by Bantu Hutu farmers, and finally the pastoral Tutsi with their herds of cattle.

This was overlaid with the "Hamitic Hypothesis". Believing the Africans too savage to achieve "civilization" on their own, Europeans tried to attribute progress, such as iron-working or the ruins of Great Zimbabwe, to non-African sources, ranging from Atlantis or the Phoenicians to the Queen of Sheba (as reflected in H. Rider-Haggard's "King Solomon's Mines"). Finally, they settled on the Hamites, the mythical descendants of Noah's son Ham, who they believed carried the virtues of civilization down the Nile and farther south into Darkest Africa.

The Tutsis were perceived as Hamites, lighter-skinned, taller and with more delicate features, who had travelled from Ethiopia and established themselves as rulers of the more numerous Bantu Hutus.

The Hamitic myth also had the great advantage of providing an excuse for European domination, as merely the latest in the series of ever more civilized intrusions. The consequence was that the colonizers, first German and then Belgian, adopting the strategy of "divide and conquer", allied themselves with the established Tutsi "Hamite" rulers and governed through them.

But all this was rapidly reversed as the fervor for independence swept across Africa in the late 50's. For a number of reasons, the Belgians suddenly threw their support to the majority Hutus, and when the "Hutu Republic" of Rwanda was established in 1962, years of inferior treatment had encouraged severe resentment among the new rulers. This period saw the "Hamite" myth of alleged Tutsi superiority turned on its head, with extremist Hutus calling for Tutsis to be sent back to their mythical roots in Ethiopia, in the form of bodies flowing down the tributary of the Nile that flows through Rwanda.

Attacks on Tutsis began, often lethal, sending a wave of refugees to neighboring countries, a return invasion by a rebel army of exiled Tutsis in 1990, followed in 1994 by the Genocide, when, during 100 days, nearly 1 million Tutsis were slaughtered, along with many Hutus who tried to defend or shelter them.

The victory of the rebels put an end to the Genocide. The new government pursued a policy of reconciliation, which included suppression of the concepts of Twa, Hutu, and Tutsi, in favor of a single Rwandan national identity.

The story above is the official government story of Rwanda's history. Where that narrative seems to most seriously depart from reality is its depiction of the pre-colonial Rwandan kingdom as a virtual Eden, in which the three groups lived in peaceful harmony.

Pre-colonial Rwanda

The colonial administration portrayed the Twa, Hutu, and Tutsi as separate ethnic and racial groups, which fit well into the race biology myths of the 19th and early 20th centuries. The truth seems to have been somewhat more complicated. Before the Europeans arrived, the Rwandan kingdom was divided into clans, tracing their origins to mythic founders, which generally included members of all three social groups. There was also a fluidity among the groups. A Hutu who acquired ten cows became a Tutsi, a Tutsi who was reduced to ownership of less than ten cows became a Hutu. All that ended with the Belgian colonial authorities, who, seeing the social groups as ethnicities, issued identity cards establishing the permanent classification of each individual.

This mistake, perhaps trivial on its face, resulted in tragic consequences, encouraging resentment among the Hutu, and following the reversal that gave them power, to genocide committed by extremists.

It was a poor understanding of prehistory that led to the tragedy. But the question is if better knowledge helps or hinders the current government's attempts at reconciliation? The government has its narrative for the origins of the Genocide, and today it is illegal to label people as Twa, Hutu, or Tutsi. Instead there is a single Rwandan national identity, an official policy that seems to be working, as Rwandans, traumatized by what happened, seem largely content to choose a program for peace.

There is a risk that archaeology, in pursuit of the past no matter what the repercussions, may not conform to the narrative, and could even threaten the current reconciliation. For example, ethno-archaeological studies reveal the government's picture of a pacific Eden before the arrival of the Europeans is just a myth. The pre-colonial Rwandan kingdom was dominated by a Tutsi elite, and many of the majority Hutu were bound by very negative patron-client relationships. There was violence in the old Rwanda, not least as the Tutsi kingdom conquered the Hutu-led chiefdoms on its periphery.

So, what is the role of archaeology in a post-conflict situation like Rwanda? Archaeology is largely a creation of Western thought and values, and archaeologists during the colonial period (and often since) have interpreted their findings in that light. Today there is a concentrated effort to develop a post-colonial archaeology, sensitive to local participation and values. John Giblin, who excavated in Rwanda for his doctorate, and is now in charge of the African collections at the British Museum, has written extensively about this quandary. Do archaeologists have the right to publish any conclusions they reach, when human lives could literally be threatened? Giblin's work is also the focus of a 2009 video documentary exploring the issue called "Piecing Together Rwanda's Past".

Archaeology and Post-Genocide Rwanda

Rwanda is relatively little explored archaeologically, and far-reaching conclusions can still rest on very few finds. A key focus of the documentary questions the colonial division into distinct ethnic stereotypes, with the Twa as solely hunter-gatherers, the Hutu just farmers, and the Tutsi only herders, by drawing attention to the finding of what appears to be a cow's tooth tentatively dated to the 3rd Century AD, indicating there were Hutu cattle herders long before the Tutsi arrived. In his book, "The Great Lakes of Africa", Jean-Pierre Chrétien argues that pastoralism had existed in Eastern Africa as long ago as the 1st century; rather than invasions, the arrivals of the three social groups were slow micro-migrations lasting over centuries rather than decades; and that the abandonment of large sites after the 16th century refutes an "Hamitic invasion". He says tensions between farmers and herders may have developed after the arrival of new plants from the Americas and growing population around that time resulted in a conflict over land.

Giblin draws attention to the fluidity of identification of foragers, farmers, or herders in excavations conducted by himself and others in the Virunga Caves in the north of the country. He says that while those who dwelt in the caves might have been expected to be Twa, because of their location in what was once rainforest, archaeologists in the 60's identified remains there as Hutu, based on physiological stereotypes, while two decades later examinations of animal remains brought conclusions implying that herders had lived in the caves.

Giblin says his own excavations in 2007 suggested the presence instead of foragers, possessing specialized hunting knowledge. But he rejects that any of these subsistence roles can be directly attributed to Twa, Hutu, or Tutsi, bound in exclusive roles, that any individual could have multiple sources of subsistence. Giblin points out as well that the caves may have been occupied by different groups over time. His excavation of the Akameru cave also suggests that the conventional chronology of pottery in the Great Lakes region may need adjusting.

While the ambiguity surrounding the Virunga Caves plays to the Rwandan government's narrative, Giblin's more spectacular discovery at Kabusanze in southern Rwanda does not. There the excavators found a pit burial dating to the 4th Century AD, containing the complete skeleton of a recently born infant and most of the remains of an adult, believed to have been male. Included was what is believed to be a complete set of ceramic vessels, iron objects, including a necklace and a bracelet, and a cowrie shell, which implies long-distance trading contacts either to the Indian Ocean coast to the east or the Atlantic to the west. Charred seeds of sorghum and pearl millet found at Kabusanze are the earliest evidence of cereal farming in Rwanda.

All this led to the museum authorities expressing great interest in putting the finds on display at the National Ethnographic Museum in Butare/Huye.

What did not play to the government narrative of a pre-colonial pacific Rwandan Eden was the analysis of the bones of the adult, which indicated they had been subjected to great violence around the time of death, including skinning and possible decapitation, and apparent

marrow extraction, which might suggest cannibalism. Subsequently, interest in putting the remains on display disappeared.

There are parallels between the challenges facing archaeologists in post-genocide Rwanda with the more prominent problems facing journalists there. In the early 70's, at the height of the Vietnam War, I turned from pursuing an academic career to radio journalism, because I thought it could make a positive difference. I loved working in radio, especially at a number of community stations, working for social change. All of which made it that much harder to discover that one of the prime inciters of the racial hatred that led to the Rwandan genocide was a radio station, Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines (RTLM), which often referred to the Tutsi as "cockroaches" who needed to be exterminated. For example:

"And you people who live... near Rugunga... go out. You will see the cockroaches' straw huts in the marsh... I think that those who have guns should immediately go to these cockroaches... encircle them and kill them..."

Kantano Habimana on RTLM, April 12, 1994 (Quoted in Wikipedia)

Nowadays Rwanda is a peaceful country, but the media are not completely free. There is a self-censorship practiced by local journalists, who know there are limits to how much they can criticize their government. And who can blame them? They've seen what uncontrolled "fake news" can lead to.

Consequences for archaeologists may not be as obvious, but generations of colonial prejudices created the fictional Hutu-Tutsi history, and provided the ammunition for the hate-mongers on RTLM. Any archaeologist working in Rwanda faces a challenge. But suppressing their finds is not the answer, what Rwanda needs is more archaeology, not a distorted picture.

There is a related issue of what has been called "indigenous archaeology", the vital involvement of local communities, with their interpretations of local finds. There is a challenge here, a risk of repeating the errors of early Western archaeologists trying to put their own myths into their finds. Schliemann notoriously dug at Troy and Mycenae with a copy of Homer in one hand, and made serious mistakes trying to read that story into what he was finding. He dug through and destroyed much of the Troy that would have dated to a Trojan War and found a "Treasure of Priam" and a "Mask of Agamemnon" that were hundreds of years older than he believed. Digging up what he thought to be the first European "civilization", Evans recast the women in the frescos of Knossos as Art Nouveau sophisticates. Presumably early excavators in Palestine tried to interpret what they were finding from the Bible.

Indigenous populations have every right to read their own narratives into archaeological finds, just as modern "druids" have every right to celebrate the solstices at Stonehenge in their own fashion. To prevent new violence, the government of Rwanda has every right to suggest a harmonious and non-violent pre-colonial past.

However, that doesn't excuse archaeologists skewing or suppressing their analyses to fit someone else's narrative. But they also need to be highly aware that what they uncover and publish has consequences.

The Hutu Ten Commandments

(published in Kangura in 1990)

1. All Hutus must know that the Tutsi woman, wherever she may be, is serving the Tutsi ethnic group. In consequence, any Hutu who does the following is a traitor:
 - Acquires a Tutsi wife
 - Acquires a Tutsi mistress
 - Acquires a Tutsi secretary or dependent
2. All Hutus must know that our Hutu daughters are more worthy and more conscientious in their role of woman, spouse and mother. Are they not more beautiful, good secretaries and more sincere!
3. Hutu women, be vigilant and bid your husbands, brothers and sons to come to their senses.
4. All Hutus must know that the Tutsi is dishonest in business. His only goal is ethnic superiority.

WE KNOW FROM EXPERIENCE

In consequence, any Hutu who does the following is a traitor:

- whoever makes alliance with a Tutsi in business
- whoever invests his money or state money in a Tutsi company
- whoever lends money or borrows it from a Tutsi
- whoever grants favors to Tutsi in business (granting of import license, bank loans, building parcel, public tender offers...)

5. The strategic political, administrative, economical, military and security positions must be reserved for Hutu.

6. The education sector (students, teachers, ...)

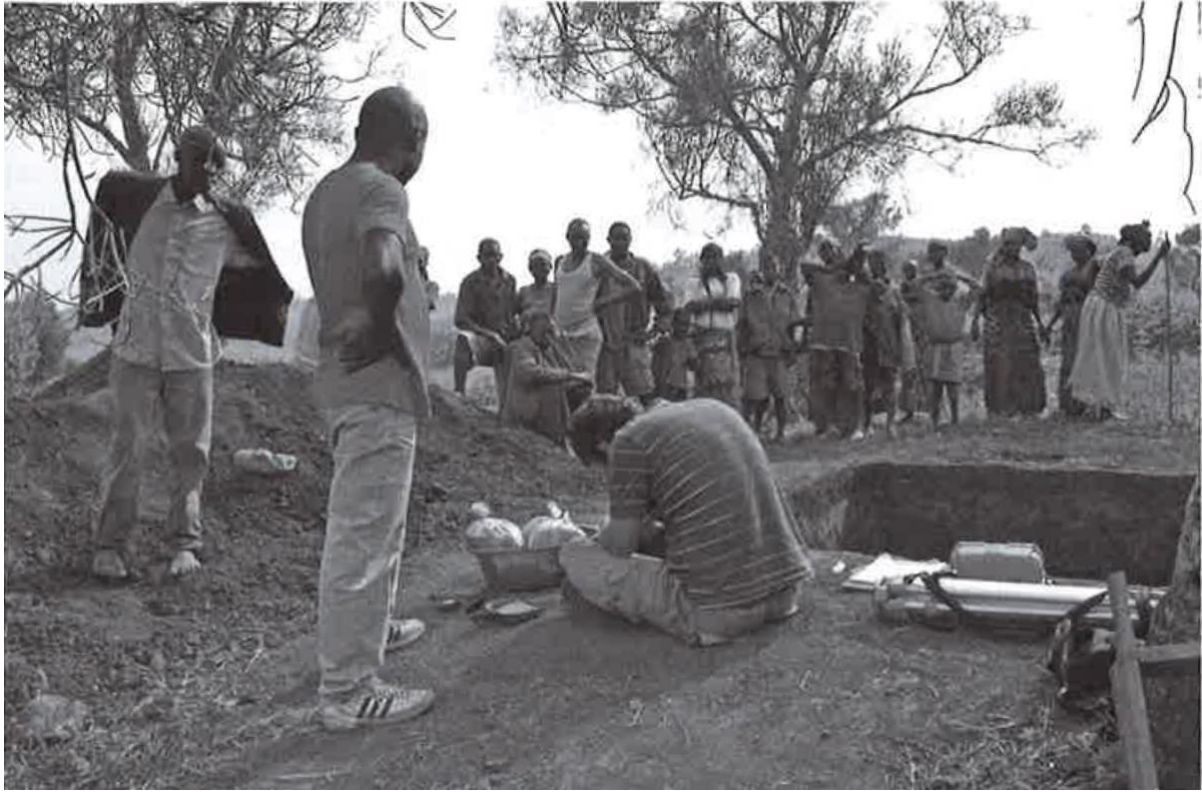
Pre-genocide anti-Tutsi propaganda, from the Kigali Genocide Memorial, Photo: George Wood



Genocide victims, Photo: Gil Serpereau/Flickr



Skulls and bones of genocide victims at the Karongi genocide memorial, Photo: George Wood



The Kabusanze dig, Photo: John Giblin (from Giblin 2013)



The Kabusanze adult burial and grave goods (from Giblin 2010)



One of the Virunga caves, from “Piecing Together Rwanda’s Past”, Banyak Film



Photo from within the Mweru Cave (from Giblin 2015)

Further reading:

General descriptions of Rwandan history and the Genocide:

Chrétien, J.-P., 2003. *The Great Lakes of Africa: Two Thousand Years of History*. Zone Books: New York.

Newbury, D., 2009. *The Land Beyond the Mists*. Ohio University Press: Athens.

Prunier, G., 2014. *The Rwandan Crisis: History of a Genocide*. C. Hurst & Company: London.

More specialized reading:

Andersson, S. 2001. *A Step 'Not' Beyond Ethnicity in Rwanda – Political Mythology and Social Identity*, Masters thesis in Sociology, Lund University, Swedish International Cooperation Agency: Stockholm.

Giblin, J., 2010. Re-constructing the Past in Post-Genocide Rwanda: An Archaeological Contribution. PhD dissertation, University College London.

---- 2013. Politics, Ideology, and Indigenous Perspectives. Mitchell, P. and Lane, P. (eds) *Oxford Handbook of African Archaeology*. Oxford University Press: Oxford: 253-265.

---- 2014. Introduction: de-centring ethical assumptions by re-centring ethical debate in African archaeology. *Azania: Archaeological Research in Africa* 49 (2): 131:135.

---- 2015. Political and Theoretical Problems for the Archaeological Identification of Precolonial Twa, Tutsi, and Hutu in Rwanda. Richard, F. and MacDonald, K. (eds) *Ethnic Ambiguity and the African Past*. Left Coast Press: Walnut Creek: 217-244.

---- 2015. Archaeological Ethics and Violence in Post-genocide Rwanda. *Ethics and the Archaeology of Violence*. Springer: New York, Heidelberg, Dordrecht, London: 33-49.

Giblin, J., King, R., and Smith, B. 2013. Decolonial Challenges and Post-Genocide Archaeological Politics in Rwanda. *Public Archaeology* 11 (3): 123-143.

Lane, P. 2011. Possibilities for a postcolonial archaeology in sub-Saharan Africa: indigenous and usable pasts. *World Archaeology* 43 (1): 7-25.

Reid, A. 2013. The Emergence of States in Great Lakes Africa. Mitchell, P. and Lane, P. (eds) *Oxford Handbook of African Archaeology*. Oxford University Press: Oxford: 887-900.

Sanders, E. 1969. The Hamitic Hypothesis; Its Origin and Functions in Time Perspective. *Journal of African History* 10 (4): 521-532.

Video:

For a powerful dramatic depiction of the Genocide:

Hotel Rwanda, 2004 (http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0395169/?ref=fn_al_tt_1)

For a popular exploration of the issues John Griblin has raised:

Banyak Film, 2009. Piecing Together Rwanda's Past (<https://vimeo.com/2759489>)

Documentary series exploring Africa's history from an African point-of-view:

BBC, 2010. The Lost Kingdoms of Africa

(http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1587302/?ref=fn_al_tt_1)

PBS, 2017. Africa's Great Civilizations

(http://www.imdb.com/title/tt6609842/?ref=nv_sr_1)