

# Rwandan Identity Construction Post-Genocide & the Reconciliation Challenges It Poses

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## Introduction

After the 1994 Rwanda genocide<sup>1</sup>, which took place over the course of 100 days, leaving 800,000 (Gordts) to over a million people dead (Meeting with Jean- Damascène Gasanabo), the government of Rwanda has engaged in a complete rebranding campaign. It's a campaign that has included adopting new national symbols—such as the flag, emblem and anthem in 2001—and the re-naming of villages and provinces in 2006 (Thomson 333). No longer divided across ethnic identity lines, the Rwandan government has adopted a “we are all Rwandans” collective identity (Eramian 96) and has prioritized reconciliation efforts (“Interview Paul Kagame”). This pan-Rwandan identity and emphasis on unity and reconciliation is the product of current President Paul Kagame. He is regarded as “the philosopher, the architect, the engineer and the voice of modern Rwanda” (Habumuremyi). However, while there may be intention to unify and reconcile collective Rwandan identity, there are numerous challenges and obstacles with this top-down, state issued mandate.

This paper seeks to explore identity construction post genocide and the state managed reconciliation efforts currently underway. The paper is divided

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<sup>1</sup> In Rwanda, it is referred to as the genocide against the Tutsi.

into three main parts. Part 1A will discuss the history of ethnic labels and identity in Rwanda pre-genocide. Part 1B will discuss the subsequent abolition of ethnic labels, the new collective Rwandan identity post genocide and the challenges it poses. Part 2A will discuss reconciliation efforts post genocide, specifically the National Unity and Reconciliation Commission (NURC) and Ingando (re-education camps). Part 2B of this paper will discuss challenges and shortcomings of these state mandated reconciliation efforts. Finally, part 3 will offer conclusions.

## Brief History of Ethnicity and Identity in Rwanda

Until the 1933 introduction of national identity cards by the Belgian colonial powers, ethnic identity in Rwanda was fluid (Clark 142). Ethnicity in Rwanda was centered on three main groups: Hutu, Tutsi and Twa. While Twa consistently referred to the indigenous Pygmies that consisted of 1% of the population, (Hintjens 14) the Hutu and Tutsi ethnic labels were more fluid. An individual's ethnic label was based upon their socio-economic status (Clark 142). If you had ten or more cows, you would be considered a Tutsi; if you had less than ten cows you were considered a Hutu (Kigali Genocide Memorial). Far from being static, these ethnic labels were capable of changing depending on the number of

cows one possessed. If an individual held 20 cows one day, they would be regarded as Tutsi and if they had 5 cows the next day, they would be regarded as a Hutu. However, once the Belgian colonial authorities began issuing national identity cards, this socio-economic status-based identity transformed into a race-based one (Clark 142). Upon the creation of the ID cards, “approximately 84% declared themselves Hutu, 15% Tutsi and the remaining 1% Twa” (“HRW Report - Leave None to Tell the Story: Genocide in Rwanda”). Rather than remain something fluid, identity and ethnicity became codified and followed a patrilineal model. “Colonialism changed their meaning (from status and economic activity to race), institutionalized and stabilized categories that had been more fluid (though identity cards and race measurements) and intensified the connection between race and power” (Straus 22).

## **Pan-Rwandan Identity & the Challenges it Holds**

One of the reasons the genocide was able to achieve such a staggering body count was because of the organizational efficiency and methodological processing of who was a Tutsi vs. a Hutu. The national identification cards offered genocidaires a tool to quickly identify who was who in the genocide, making the job of systematically targeting Tutsis much easier. Ergo, it should come as little surprise that ethnic identity labels were removed from the national identification cards after the genocide (Eramian 96), and were officially removed in 1997 (Fussell). Currently, national identification cards make no mention of ethnicity and instead they focus on: name, date of birth, sex, place of issue and signature. Although national ID cards no longer list ethnic labels, the U.S. government approximates that the current ethnic breakdown is “84 percent Hutu, 15 percent Tutsi and 1 percent Twa in a densely packed

population of about 12 million” (Ryan). Interestingly enough, this is essentially the same percentage that existed prior to the genocide, with the population size being the notable difference.

Talking about ethnicity or bringing up ethnic labels in conversation risks accusations of perpetuating ethnic schisms or ‘divisionism,’ a crime according to Rwanda’s penal code (Eramian 96). Following the 1994 genocide, the Rwandan government launched a ‘deethnicization’ campaign to outlaw Twa, Tutsi and Hutu labels and replaced them with a pan-Rwandan national identity. In fact, ethnic labels on national identity cards are banned. This effort in outlawing ethnic labels both on national identity cards and in public discourse is one of the steps in the creation of a pan-Rwandan identity.

In preparation for this pan-Rwandan identity, the current government created new laws that penalize any possible threat to this newfound unity and inclusive identity. In 2003, under the Organic Law, a new series of thought and speech crimes were introduced, such as ‘genocide mentality,’ ‘divisionism’ and ‘ethnic ideology.’ Within these laws, “ethnicity has been delegitimized (and is illegal) as a means of public political expression or identification” (Hintjens 10). These laws are a step on the path towards a newly constructed identity and ultimately, the state mandated goal of reconciliation and unity. It can and should be understood as the next step in the state initiated process of identity construction and reconciliation. These laws are used as a punitive measure for those who dissent, for those who question the desired and targeted goals of the new pan-Rwandan identity.

No longer subjected to ethnic labels or even discussion of them for fear of inciting divisionism, Rwandans now go by the state mandated, “we are all Rwandan” narrative. This narrative is based on

the idea that prior to colonization, Rwanda was a unified country and that ethnic driven hatred was a product of colonialism. According to the official narrative, colonial policies of divide and rule were essentially responsible for creating division among Rwandan people, and by extent, the genocide. The 1994 genocide is regarded as a “mere aberration in Rwanda’s peaceful and united history and the violence was caused by external forces” (Williamson 93). By eliminating these labels both from public discourse and national identity cards, the government of Rwanda attempts to unify Rwanda under one overarching umbrella—an inclusive pan-Rwandan one, however this is not without its flaws and challenges.

One of the flaws surrounding this pan-Rwandan identity is that it is imposed from the top and is thus a continuation of the Rwandan state exercising tight control over public expression of political iden-

tities. Open political discussions are still challenging. Upon facing criticism, the government accuses its critics of divisionism and genocide mentality (Hintjens 5). To this day, Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF)—the rebel armed group that fought against the genocidal regime, ultimately liberating Rwanda, and currently the leading party in Rwanda under President Kagame—crimes are still not sufficiently covered or addressed (Clark 145). This is further proof that discussing the genocide is interwoven with the state’s tight control and its top-down approach to what can and cannot be discussed. Furthermore, by creating a pan-Rwandan identity but only focusing on prosecuting Hutus, this top-down

approach is not very inclusive. It continues to emphasize a binary of Hutu vs. Tutsi (even though that is now considered illegal). In order to fully embody this new collective identity, there needs to be a happy medium between top-down and bottom-up approaches, and the state will need to loosen its monopoly on oversight of the issue and encourage dialogue at the local level.

Although ethnic labeling and identity is officially illegal and divisionism is considered a grave crime, ethnicity is still very much alive in Rwanda (Hintjens 13). Ethnicity is intricately connected to memorialization. One example can be seen by the terminology surrounding the genocide. Rather than being called the 1994 genocide, it is referred to as the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi.<sup>2</sup> This deliberate choice of terminology is mandated by the 2003 constitution (Waldorf 49). While it is absolutely true that the majority of the victims were Tutsi, and it

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was a campaign to systematically cleanse Rwanda of its Tutsi population, labeling it and referring to it as such reinforces a binary of Hutu vs. Tutsi. By doing so, the government risks replacing old ethnic labels with new, yet equally divisive ones, such as ‘genocidaire’ and ‘victim (Waldorf 49). It creates a problematic impression that Tutsis are survivors and Hutus are perpetrators of the genocide and seemingly diminishes any space for stories and narratives about Hutu survivors and Hutu protectors of Tutsis

<sup>2</sup> Every genocide memorial visited (Kigali, Nyamata and Ntarama) and every meeting throughout the global field intensive made special note to call it the genocide against the Tutsi.

during the genocide; “By preserving genocide as the defining moment of Rwandan history, the RPF regime has elevated Tutsi into victims, even those not directly targeted in the genocide. And Hutu, even those who refused to kill, become suspected accomplices at best, and genocidal killers at worst” (Hintjens 32). The Kigali Memorial Center showcased minimal mention of Hutu victims or of Hutu protectors throughout its extensive exhibit chronicling the genocide and its aftermath. Banning ethnic labels but focusing so heavily on ethnicity in memorialization leads to problematic reconciliation efforts.

“There has always been inherent tension between the government’s forward looking reconciliation narrative, which seeks to erase ethnicity, and its backward-looking genocide narrative, which inevitably emphasizes ethnicity.” (Waldorf 49)

## Reconciliation Efforts Post-Genocide

Reconciliation efforts post genocide have been of the utmost priority for the current government of Rwanda, led by President Kagame. In a 2014 interview with Foreign Affairs Magazine, President Kagame stated:

Reconciliation means something beyond, you know, someone did this to the other one and now they are talking to each other. It really means [thinking about] why would we even have done what we did? We are trying to bring back a nation that has been torn apart, so we’re talking about [rebuilding] a nation, one that embodies Hutus, Tutsis, and Twas. (“Rebooting Rwanda”)

The fact that the leader of Rwanda is so focused on reconciliation, unity and rebuilding the nation for all is inspiring. The progress Rwanda has made in the nearly twenty-two years after the genocide

is undoubtedly remarkable. Rwanda has the world’s highest share of women in parliament, 63.8%—or 51 out of 80 (Women in National Parliaments), it has Umuganda, a national monthly community service day (Mourby), and it created an entire government agency dedicated to unity and reconciliation efforts, the National Unity and Reconciliation Commission (NURC) in 1999.

This paper does not argue against the intentions of the state organized efforts of progress and reconciliation, but rather intends to shed light on some of the flaws of these policies in their current form. While there are numerous state run programs pertaining to reconciliation efforts, such as Gacaca (a community justice system of courts) and Abunzi (community mediators who help resolve problems instead of going directly to court), this paper will focus on two: the NURC and one of their programs, ingando (re-education camps).

The NURC was created in March 1999 by the parliamentary law N° 03/99 of 12/03/99 to promote unity and reconciliation among Rwandans (“Background of the National Unity and Reconciliation Commission”). According to the NURC,

Unity and Reconciliation of Rwandans is defined as a consensus practice of citizens who have common nationality, who share the same culture and have equal rights; citizens characterized by trust, tolerance, mutual respect, equality, complementary roles/interdependence, truth, and healing of one another’s wounds inflicted by our history, with the objectives of laying a foundation for sustainable development. (“*The National Policy on Unity and Reconciliation*”)

This commission is tasked with putting together the national program for the promotion of unity and reconciliation, to sensitize Rwandans again and

mobilize them around this idea (Meeting with Richard Kananga). The NURC works with the redefined Rwandan identity, with the ‘we are all Rwandans’ mentality, focusing on coming together as Rwandans and facing the challenges together—as one collective unit. The NURC employs a didactic approach with a heavy focus on education. This is exemplified in its use of ingando. Launched in 1996, ingando was created for the purpose of facilitating the reintegration of Tutsi returnees and rebuilding community co-existence. In 1999, the NURC took over the management of these camps (Clark 139). This next section will focus on what exactly takes place in Ingando.

First and foremost it is essential to draw a distinction between the two types of ingando camps. There are solidarity camps, which are for civil society and church leaders, gacaca judges, incoming university students and politicians. There are also reeducation camps, which are for ex-soldiers and ex-combatants, released prisoners, street children and prostitutes (Thomson 333). This paper will focus on the latter.

Ingando is a twelve-week reeducation process initiated by the state. Throughout this process, the government, through the NURC, reeducates its participants. It is important to note that the participants in this type of Ingando are forcibly enrolled in these camps as a necessary step before being reintroduced to their home communities (Thomson 333). These camps focus on history lessons and lessons in truth and reconciliation. There are specific expectations the government has for Ingando graduates. According to an Ingando official speaking to a group of participants, “you will not be able to return to your communities without understanding the real causes of the genocide. We will test you on history to make sure you understand. Remember...you are a former Hutu. We are all Rwandans now and this is

the basis of our history lessons” (Thomson 334-335). The history lessons focus on the premise that prior to colonization, Rwanda existed in ethnic unity and harmony—the state approved narrative (Thomson 333). In conjunction with these history lessons, Hutu ingando participants were constantly encouraged to “tell the truth” (Thomson 337). This emphasis on truth telling for Hutu participants showcases the fact that ethnicity still plays a role in these camps. The aforementioned state mandated reconciliation efforts have the potential to be effective tools of unity and reconciliation, but due to their emphasis on collective memorialization and the continued obsession with ethnicity, they ultimately fall short of their stated goals.

## Challenges and Shortcomings of Reconciliation

As previously mentioned, while substantial progress has been made in Rwanda in the almost twenty-two years post-genocide, it is important to balance intention with execution. This paper maintains that the reconciliation efforts focus too much on a top-down approach to reconciliation, rather than bottom-up. The NURC has much potential to be a contribution to the reconciliation process, but instead it is “the manifestation of a fundamentally flawed approach that must be addressed. The creation of unity, epitomised by a ‘Rwandan’ national identity, must embrace and acknowledge difference rather than deny it... it must work with existing reality rather than try to manufacture a new reality” (Clark 147). The greatest missed opportunity of the NURC is its focus on manufacturing a new identity rather than addressing the different narratives and different truths; it pushes them aside and instead focuses on constructing a pan-Rwandan identity. To be sure, the creation of collective identity post genocide is noteworthy, however it fundamentally

misses the mark when it is imposed from above rather than occurring as a collective acceptance. According to, Chi Adanna Mgbako, a leading human rights scholar, “Ethnicity is a powerful idea; it cannot simply be talked out of existence” (Mgbako 220). By attempting to talk it out of existence, the current government of Rwanda and the NURC succeeds in creating a homogenous identity but ultimately fails in creating a meaningful and truly reconciled one.

For the NURC, one of their critical challenges is that reconciliation is extremely difficult to measure. Reconciliation is recognized as, “a painful process that requires the knitting of the torn social fabric” (Meeting with Richard Kananga). It requires a delicate balance of both the demands of justice and peace (Meeting with Richard Kananga). When discussing reconciliation and measuring its success, Richard Kananga, the Regional Coordinator of NURC, highlights that there is no one way of going about reconciliation and that trust is a useful indicator of whether a population is reconciled (Meeting with Richard Kananga). In fact, trust is used as an indicator on the Rwanda Reconciliation Barometer (RRB). The RRB is a NURC tool intended to be used as a structured quantitative research instrument. It is a national public opinion survey to track the reconciliation progress in Rwanda. Throughout the RRB, specifically the 2010 quantitative study, trust

has risen. They have risen to the point where “more than 92% of adult Rwandans believe that relations have improved between groups that found themselves in opposing camps during the genocide” (“Rwanda Reconciliation Barometer” at 74). For a 2010 report, a mere sixteen years after the genocide, to indicate that 92% of Rwandans feel more trustful and view relations as improved is a remarkable feat. However, there is a nuance. As promising and useful trust may be as an indicator for the RRB, it proves problematic in other efforts.

Trust proves to be a problematic indicator when it comes to accepting other narratives of the genocide. The ingando camps exemplify this. Since one of the objectives of the ingando camps is for its participants to tell the truth, there should be a space where these truths can be discussed and explored. By forbidding talk about ethnicity, the state and by extension its reconciliation mechanisms like ingando, is creating a space where only one truth about the genocide can exist. According to Susan Thomson, a Canadian who was sent to an ingando camp for a week in 2006 during her dissertation fieldwork for a ‘re-education’, the camps do not teach reconciliation and instead focus on teaching genocidaires to “shut up and to stay on the sidelines of public life” (Thomson 337). Through interviews, she discovered that many

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is measured. Figure 22 and Table 134 in this report highlight that the levels of trust between those on different sides of the Rwandan conflict and geno-

ingando graduates believe there is no reason to tell their actual truths and that there is no real space for that within the camps, even though that is a stated

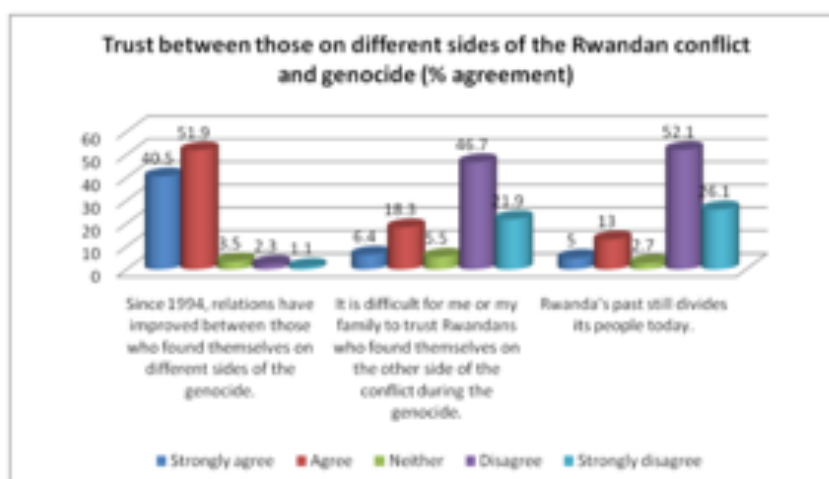
purpose of them. An interviewee, who graduated in 2004, told her, “even if I am innocent, I am a former Hutu. In the new Rwanda this means I must be guilty of killing” (Thomson 337). This is problematic because it has the potential to leave many people disconnected from their narratives, as though there is no space for their stories to be heard and shared. It leaves people feeling ‘other-ed’ and in turn creates opposing narratives: those representing the modern Rwandan state and state accepted narratives and those representing other accounts that do not currently fit into the state accepted mold. By neglecting to create a space where these truths can be shared, mistrust is formed. Rather than feeling reconciled after graduating, graduates feel that it is merely another tool to suppress them, “I am a former Hutu. This means I am a source of shame for this government. Prison, gacaca, ingando are just ways for them to make sure that we don’t think for ourselves. The message is that we are not full citizens” (Thomson 335). Despite the emphasis on telling the truth, there appears to be little space for that. Additionally despite the ‘we are all Rwandans’ narrative, graduates acknowledge that there is a collective guilt attached to them as they mention their former Hutu-ness. In short, while the intention behind ingando is reconciliation, its execution is flawed.

morialize. Reconciliation is constantly regarded as a process. However, it continuously fails to be treated like an organic one and instead is mandated as a state process, through a top-down approach. While the intent for progress, unity and reconciliation exist in Rwanda, they are stifled by the state intervention and handling of them. Until ethnicity, differing narratives, and truths can at least be discussed, the creation of a pan-Rwandan identity and reconciliation fall short of their true potential. It is within reason to assume that given Kagame’s all but guaranteed third term extension (“Rwanda’s Paul Kagame to Run for Third Presidential Term”), this would continue to be the case. With the extension of his presidency, it is imperative for Kagame and his administration to focus on making this pan-Rwandan identity more inclusive and accepted.

## Conclusion

Identity construction and reconciliation efforts have been the top priority post genocide, especially under current President Kagame. The investment in this pan-Rwandan identity is apparent through penalizing divisionism as a crime and removing ethnic labels from the identity cards. Every meeting that took place over the course of the GFI trip focused on this ‘we are all Rwandans’ identity. Hearing ethnic labels was all but limited to memorials, where ethnic labels were consistently used to me-

Figure 22: Trust between those on different sides of the Rwandan conflict and genocide (% agreement)



Source: Republic of Rwanda. National Unity and Reconciliation Commission. Rwanda Reconciliation Barometer. NURC, Oct. 2010. 1-117, at 74.

Table 134: Trust between those on different sides of the Rwandan conflict and genocide by social category [%]

AGREEMENT	Genocide Survivor	Relative of Perpetrator	Tigiste	Old Case Refugee	New case refugee	Historically marginalized people	Refused	Other
Since 1994, relations have improved between those who found themselves on different sides of the genocide	89.3%	92.3%	97.1%	92.6%	94.2%	87.1%	92.6%	3.0%
It is difficult for me or my family to trust Rwandans who found themselves on the other side of the conflict during the genocide	37.7%	19.0%	21.2%	34.0%	25.1%	35.5%	24.6%	20.7%
Rwanda's past still divides its people today	20.8%	14.9%	18.2%	23.4%	15.7%	16.1%	5.7%	22.2%
NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS	486	757	34	94	585	31	122	845
*While responses to certain social categories have been included, small numbers of self-identified respondents within those categories prevent meaningful statistical analysis								

Source: Republic of Rwanda. National Unity and Reconciliation Commission. Rwanda Reconciliation Barometer. NURC, Oct. 2010. 1-117, at 75.