

2010

The Western Media and the Portrayal of the Rwandan Genocide

Cherice Joyann Estes
CSUSB

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/history-in-the-making>



Part of the [African History Commons](#), and the [Mass Communication Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Estes, Cherice Joyann (2010) "The Western Media and the Portrayal of the Rwandan Genocide," *History in the Making*: Vol. 3 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/history-in-the-making/vol3/iss1/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Arthur E. Nelson University Archives at CSUSB ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in History in the Making by an authorized editor of CSUSB ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@csusb.edu.

The Western Media and the Portrayal of the Rwandan Genocide

BY CHERICE JOYANN ESTES

ABSTRACT: On December 9, 1948, the United Nations established its Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. Genocides, however, have continued to occur, affecting millions of people around the globe. The 1994 genocide in Rwanda resulted in an estimated 800,000 deaths. Global leaders were well aware of the atrocities, but failed to intervene. At the same time, the Western media's reports on Rwanda tended to understate the magnitude of the crisis. This paper explores the Western media's failure to accurately interpret and describe the Rwandan Genocide. Recognizing the outside media's role in mischaracterizations of the Rwanda situation is particularly useful when attempting to understand why western governments were ineffective in their response to the atrocity. The media is self-evidently a central tool in informing the public about issues, shaping public opinion, and promoting change within societies. Despite the objectivity that the media is expected to maintain, there is no denying that the media, whether intentionally or not, has occasionally reported on events and issues in ways that have misled or been misinterpreted by the public. The western media's treatment of the Rwandan Genocide is a clear example of inaccurate and incomplete news coverage.

In one hundred days, an estimated 800,000 Rwandan citizens lost their lives, while the United States and European powers failed to intervene. Inaccurate reports in the Western media compounded the failure of outside governments to recognize the crisis as genocide. Western publications circulated stories that characterized the tragedy in Rwanda in ways that minimized the

The Western Media

enormity of the event. For example the media would characterize the situation as "a tribal war" or merely the "continuation of a civil war."

The primary purpose of this paper is to analyze the ways the Western media described the 1994 Rwandan Genocide and contrast those descriptions with the actual historical facts and circumstances of Rwandan politics and social relations. Too often, African political events that have particular and distinguishable contexts and precedents are simply labeled as irrational tribalism, without any attention given to the causes of a particular occurrence.¹ While journalists may attempt as best they can to be objective when relaying information, they, like anyone else, are the products of their training, their upbringing, their religious affiliation, and their political and social views. And, in the case of the Western media and Africa, the question of perspective is often exacerbated by the relative ignorance of Western media about the countries in Africa that they are asked to write about. Anne Chaon, a journalist who spent time in Rwanda during the genocide, explains that:

Most journalists are not experts in genocide. Many of them - myself included - arrived in Rwanda with very little knowledge of the country. So, it was tempting, especially at the beginning, to speak of the civil war, and to link these massacres to previous massacres since 1959. We failed to understand that the killing was something totally new, that this was not a continuity of what happened before.²

¹ Melissa Wall, "An Analysis of News Magazine Coverage of the Rwanda Crisis in the United States," in *The Media and the Rwanda Genocide*, edited by Allan Thompson and Kofi Annan, (London: Pluto Press, 2007), 262.

² Anne Chaon, "Who Failed in Rwanda, Journalists or the Media?" in *The Media and the Rwanda Genocide*, edited by Robert I. Rotberg and Thomas G. Weiss, (London: Pluto Press, 2007), 160-166.

Far too often, correspondents assigned to cover an event or issue involving Africa have not received the training necessary to “cover issues, activities, and crises in developing countries.”³

The media's mischaracterization and erroneous reporting about the Rwandan genocide is apparent in examples from American, Canadian, and European periodicals, and from other sources that covered the incident while it was occurring. Many of the misguided reports were due to a lack of historical knowledge about Rwanda. Thus, the first section of this paper examines the historical foundation for the social divide between the Hutu and Tutsi in Rwanda, the two groups involved in the genocide. The paper then examines the events leading up to the genocide. The third section focuses on the genocide itself and what I term the Rwandan "hate media." In the last section of the paper, I highlight the misrepresentations of the crisis by Western media and their political ramifications.

Historical Background

Rwanda's population consists of three main groups: the Hutu (85%), the Tutsi (14%), and the Twa (1%).⁴ These three groups share the same religion, speak the same language, and, prior to colonization, lived peacefully with one another in the same community. In many cases they intermarried. Each group considered itself as belonging to a single, integrated society, despite various social differences. The shared community among the three groups was not unlike the shared communities of the West, where, for example, Catholics and Jews live and work together in the same city or suburb.

Pre-colonial Rwandese society was organized around the *mwami*, or king as the central figure of authority. The *mwami* was considered to be powerful, sacred, and divine. Rituals were carried out in his honor and a special vocabulary known as "king's

³ John C. Hammock and Joel R. Charny, “Emergency Response as Mortality Play: The Media, the Relief Agencies, and the Need for Capacity Building,” in *From Massacres to Genocide* (Washington D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1996), 125.

⁴ Catharine Newbury, “Background to Genocide: Rwanda,” *A Journal of Opinion* 23 (1995): 12.

speech" was used to describe his daily activities. Gerard Prunier, author of *The Rwanda Crisis: History of a Genocide* notes that:

The king was the father and the patriarch of his people, given to them by Imana (God). He is the providence of Rwanda, the Messiah and the savior. When he exercises his authority, he is impeccable, infallible. His decisions cannot be questioned. The parents of a victim he has unjustly struck bring him presents so that he does not resent them for having been forced to cause them affliction. They still trust him, because his judgments are always just. Whatever happens, he remains Nyagasami, the only Lord, superb and magnificent.⁵

There were three types of chiefs who were under the king: the *mutwale wa buttaka* (chief of landholdings), who was responsible for agricultural production, land attribution, and taxation; the *mutwale wa ingabo* (chief of men), in charge of recruiting men for the king's armies; and the *mutwale wa inka* (chief of pastures), who ruled over the grazing lands.⁶ The *mutwale wa buttaka* was normally Hutu as agriculture was their expertise, while most of the other chiefs were Tutsi. The chiefs were responsible for minding the cattle, working the land, and maintaining their quarters. They also set the form of payment for each household under their jurisdiction, which allowed people to make their own arrangements to fulfill their government demands. This system became known as *ubuhake* and remained in existence until the European powers changed the taxation system.⁷

Rwanda remained free from European colonization until May 4, 1894, when the first European, German Count Gustav Adolf von Goetzen, was received at court by King Rwabugiri. The King welcomed the Count, but was unaware that the European powers had already divided up the African continent at the Berlin Conference of 1885. The decision to give Rwanda to Germany was

⁵ Gerard Prunier, *The Rwanda Crisis History of a Genocide* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 10.

⁶ Prunier, 11-12.

⁷ Prunier, 12.

an act of ignorance: Germans knew nothing about Rwanda. The Rwandan monarchy continued to exist while Germany deployed twenty-four military officers and six administrators to Rwanda. According to Linda Melvern, a British journalist and published author, “The German policy was to support the chiefs in such a manner that they would be convinced that their own salvation and that of their supporters depended on their faithfulness to the German.”⁸ The Germans also supported expansion and helped the Tutsi monarchy subjugate the northern areas.

After World War I, control over Rwanda and Burundi was transferred from Germany to Belgium under a League of Nations mandate. This covenant “was to herald a new phase of human evolution, to offer a framework for practical and effective co-operation between nations for their common good.”⁹ The covenant stipulated that the “tutelage of the peoples in the colonies should be entrusted to advanced nations who, by reason of their resources, their experience, or their geographical position, could best, undertake this responsibility.”¹⁰ Rwanda and Burundi were categorized as countries lacking in self-determination. Belgium agreed to assume administration, as well as to promote development, free speech, and freedom of religion.

The Germans had implemented a policy of indirect rule, which changed to one of direct rule under the Belgians. Slowly, the Belgians progressed in changing the societal structures that had existed throughout Rwanda’s history. In 1922, the king was forced to accept the assistance of Belgian representatives and one year later Belgium made it illegal for the king to have regional chiefs. Belgian colonialists dismantled the only structure that Rwandans had known. In 1931, King Mwami Musinga, who opposed colonization, was removed from power by Belgian administrators and replaced by Mutara Rudahigwa, who later became known as “king of the whites.”¹¹ His values and practices were more “western,” and his conversion to Christianity in 1943 became part

⁸ Melvern, Linda , *A People Betrayed The Role of the West in Rwanda’s Genocide* (London: Zed Books Ltd, 2000), 7.

⁹ Melvern, 9.

¹⁰ Melvern, 9.

¹¹ Melvern, 10.

The Western Media

of the Belgian policy that made Christianity mandatory for anyone wishing to be part of the Tutsi elite.¹²

The Belgian government divided Rwanda into four chiefdoms and gave Belgian administrators the authority to control every aspect of Rwandan society. They introduced currency and implemented an education system available only to the sons of chiefs. They also created an African civil service that included only members of the Tutsi oligarchy. Despite the Tutsi being a decidedly small fraction of the total population – dwarfed in numbers by the Hutu—Belgium was intent on elevating the Tutsi over the Hutu based on physical characteristics. In this way, the Belgians were cementing their unfavorable attitudes toward the Hutu. Under the direction of the Belgian administration, Tutsi chiefs demanded forced labor from the Hutu in building roads. The Belgians insisted on cruel and inhumane beatings as a method of punishment and control. As a result, hundreds of thousands of Hutu peasants fled to Uganda to become migrant workers and escape the mistreatment.¹³

European Stereotypes and the Hamitic Myth

Europeans in Rwanda had long noted physical differences within the Rwandan population and, beginning with the Belgians, they began to exploit those differences to create a social divide and implement policies based on racial discrimination. John Hanning Speke, a well-known Nile explorer in the 1800s, linked Rwandan “monarchic institutions” to the arrival of conquering invaders from Ethiopia (whom he speculated to be ancestors of the Tutsi). Speke posited that Tutsis were of a Hamitic, non-African race, and thus “superior.”¹⁴ Other explorers, such as Sir Samuel Baker and Gaetano Casati, accepted this formulation.

Missionaries, such as Father van den Burgt and John Roscoe, also believed the explorers’ theories; some, however, had different opinions. Father Pages, for example, believed that the Tutsis were descendants of ancient Egyptians. Father van den

¹² Melvern, 10.

¹³ Melvern, 10.

¹⁴ Prunier, 7.

Burgt claims, “We can see Caucasian skulls and beautiful Greek profiles side by side with Semitic and even Jewish features, elegant golden-red beauties in the heart of Ruanda and Urundi.”¹⁵

Tutsi features were described as though they were European and not of the same group as the Hutu. Prunier notes that some Europeans thought:

The Bahima [a Tutsi clan] differ absolutely by the beauty of their features and their light colour from the Bantu agriculturalists of an inferior type. Tall and well-proportioned, they have long thin noses, a wide brow and fine lips. They say they came from the north. Their intelligent and delicate appearance, their love of money, their capacity to adapt to any situation seem to indicate a semitic-origin.¹⁶

These Hamitic or Semitic characteristics were purportedly the underlying reasons why the Tutsi emerged as the privileged group. These stereotypes not only demonstrate that the Europeans were ignorant of Rwandese history and populations, but that they in fact facilitated the spread of racial animosity and hatred among the different groups. Based on the assumption that the Tutsi were ancient European descendants, the Belgian government decided that they were “fit to rule.” The Hutu, by contrast, were deemed inferior. They were described as having typical African features: “short and thick-set with a big head, jovial expression, a wide nose and enormous lips.”¹⁷

In 1933, the Belgian administration put together a group of Belgian bureaucrats to conduct a census of the entire population. The purpose was to classify every Rwandan as belonging to one of the three groups: Hutu, Tutsi, or Twa. They counted each Rwandan, measuring height, nose length, and eye shape.¹⁸ Using physical characteristics as a way to group people into categories was, in fact, a flawed methodology because many Rwandans were mixed due to intermarriage. The Belgians' solution to that issue

¹⁵ Prunier, 7.

¹⁶ Prunier, 7.

¹⁷ Prunier, 6.

¹⁸ Melvern, 11.

The Western Media

was to classify persons who were mixed as Hutu. Hutus who were wealthy and owned the required number of livestock were considered Tutsi.¹⁹

The Belgians then issued to every Rwandan an identification card that indicated the group to which the person had been assigned. The identification card policy is a primary example of how the Belgian government created and fostered a racially divided population based on physical appearance, a policy that contributed significantly to the country's progression down a path that led to genocide.

Belgian Discriminatory Policies and Their Outcomes

The favoritism displayed by the Belgian government to the Tutsi population was pervasive and resulted in the creation of an African civil service limited to Tutsi elites. In 1952, the Belgians introduced electoral procedures for advisory councils at four different administrative levels, limiting voting privileges such that the minority Tutsi won all the seats.²⁰

Because of these types of discrimination and repression, a sense of Hutu nationalism and racist ideologies began to surface in the northern region of Rwanda. In 1957, a group of Hutu nationalists published a manifesto that called for majority rule. Belgian Catholic priests supported the Hutus in their mission to gain equality and abolish discrimination within the public service, and in 1957, the United Nations pressured Belgium to liberate the Hutu.

On July 24, 1959, Rwanda's Tutsi King Mutara III Rudahigwa died while in the hospital. The Tutsi elite were under the impression that he was killed by the Belgians and that the Hutu were also involved.²¹ This rumor sparked outrage among the Tutsi population, and on November 1, 1959, a Tutsi group called Union National Rwandaise (UNAR) attacked a Hutu leader, Dominique Mbyonyumutwa, which placed Rwanda in violent turmoil. The

¹⁹ Melvern, 11.

²⁰ Melvern, 13.

²¹ Melvern, 14.

Hutu started burning Tutsi homes and launching attacks on them. Many Tutsi fled Rwanda as a result of the violence.

This upheaval was only the beginning of the repercussions from European interference and the Belgians' restructuring of Rwandan society. The Belgian government placed Rwanda under military rule on November 11, 1959. Under international pressure, they tried to rectify the situation by replacing some Tutsi chiefs with Hutu and announcing to Belgian administrators that the Hutu would now be "favored within the administration."²² Tens of thousands of Tutsi were forced into exile in neighboring countries.²³

Gregoire Kayibanda, founder of the extremist Hutu group Parmehutu, wanted to end Tutsi dominance forever. He organized rallies to overthrow the Tutsi monarchy, a goal he achieved in September 1961. By February 1962, an estimated 135,000 Tutsi refugees were living in exile in the Congo, Burundi, Uganda, and Tanganyika, and one thousand people were entering Uganda each week.²⁴

Opposition Growth Across Borders

Tutsi men displaced in refugee camps were recruited into secret militia groups, called *Inyenzi*, or cockroach, by the Hutu. On November 14, 1963, the Belgian National Guard stopped an *Inyenzi* attempt to enter Rwanda to kill Hutu.²⁵ On December 21, 1963, two hundred armed Tutsi men left Burundi and succeeded in crossing over into Rwanda, heading toward the capital Kigali. They were defeated and Kayibanda reacted to the Tutsi infiltration with an organized campaign to kill Tutsi.

These killings in 1963 left journalists puzzled as to why an event like this would happen. Lord Bertrand Russell, a Welsh historian and philosopher, spoke of the event on Vatican Radio, claiming that, "It was the most horrible and systematic extermination of a people since the Nazi's extermination of the

²² Melvern, 14.

²³ Melvern, 14.

²⁴ Melvern, 14.

²⁵ Melvern, 17.

The Western Media

Jews.²⁶ These massacres organized by Kayibanda were propelled by Kigali Radio, which aired warnings that the Tutsi were coming back to “enslave” the Hutu, proclaimed that, “The Tutsi must be killed before they killed the Hutu.”²⁷ Hoes, machetes, clubs, and any other tools attackers could access were used to kill at least five thousand men, women, and children. Some one hundred Tutsi women and children committed suicide by drowning themselves in the river to escape Hutu mobs at the Congo border.

Some consider this specific event genocide, though Europeans working for aid agencies in Rwanda during this time described the killings as “savagery of the negro.”²⁸ Unfortunately, this was not the last time that massive killings would take place; a far worse massacre – the most horrible mass destruction of human beings since the Jewish Holocaust of World War II – would occur thirty years later.

Various groups of Tutsi refugees prepared to return to their homeland in order to oppose Hutu nationalism. One group was the Rwanda Refugees Welfare Association, later known as the Rwandan Alliance for National Unity.²⁹ This group operated in exile in Kenya from 1981 to 1986. In 1987, the group changed its name to the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF). The RPF consisted of a 26-member executive committee that included 11 Tutsi and 15 Hutu who opposed then-President Habyarimana and wanted to end his regime. A guerilla army known as the Rwandan Patriotic Army eventually grew from this organization. They were well-trained, disciplined and had considerable combat experience.³⁰

Civil War 1990-1993

On October 1, 1990, the Rwandese Patriotic Army forces attacked guards posted at the Rwandese border. This surprise attack was the start of a civil war. Former Major Paul Kagame, who is the current president of Rwanda, called this “the beginning of a

²⁶ Melvern, 17.

²⁷ Melvern, 17.

²⁸ Melvern, 18.

²⁹ Melvern, 26.

³⁰ Melvern, 27.

protracted popular war.”³¹ The goal was to put an end to the Habyarimana regime, return the Tutsi to their home country, and take control of the government. Kagame worked with Habyarimana’s former accomplice, Colonel Alexis Kanyarengwe, who was a Hutu living in exile. After three years of fighting, the civil war ended with the signing of the Arusha Accords in August 1993.

The civil war gained international attention. President Habyarimana, a Hutu extremist, had come under scrutiny for the instability and violence that his rule generated throughout the region. It took thirteen months of talks to get the Rwandan government and the RPF to agree to sign the accords, the only hope for an end to the civil war.³² The negotiations were overseen by the Organization of African Unity (OAU), under the leadership of Tanzanian President Ali Hassan Mwinyi. Five African states were involved in the negotiations (Burundi, Zaire, Senegal, Uganda and Tanzania), along with four western countries: (France, Belgium, Germany, and the United States), which had observer status. Great Britain, Canada, the Netherlands, and the European Union monitored the talks from their local embassies.³³

Under the peace agreement, Rwandan presidential power was “reduced to no more than representing the Republic: the President could promulgate laws but had no authority to modify or veto them.” Not only did he have no power to nominate civil servants, but he also could not suggest names for nominations. Any messages addressed to the nation had to be approved by the Broad-Based Transitional Government (BBTG).³⁴

President Habyarimana agreed to sign this accord only to maintain a good image in the eyes of foreign donors.³⁵ He scrambled to get support from other African leaders to buy time and hold up democratization. He traveled to Uganda to meet with President Museveni on August 31, 1993. The meeting turned out to be unfavorable for President Habyarimana and left him

³¹ Prunier, 96.

³² Melvern, 52.

³³ Melvern, 52.

³⁴ Prunier, 193.

³⁵ Prunier, 195.

The Western Media

searching for outside supporters to delay the implementation of the Accords.³⁶

Despite Habyarimana's signing of the Arusha Accords in August 1993, he failed to implement the agreement; too much was at stake. The Hutu supremacists who had supported him realized that he was incapable of defending their interests. The Hutu extremist group Coalition Pour la Defense de la Republique (CDR) decided to withdraw their support for Habyarimana and search for more radical representation and appease foreign governments who supported Habyarimana financially. Despite criticism from Europe and other African states, and despite the eagerness of the RPF to integrate the forces and implement the accords, Habyarimana refused.

On April 6, 1994, Habyarimana flew to Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania and met with Tanzanian President Ali Hassan Mwinyi, Vice-President George Saitoti of Kenya, President Cyprien Ntaryamira of Burundi, and Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni. The focus of the discussion was supposed to be on Burundi; Habyarimana's refusal, however, to abide by the Arusha Accords was the topic of discussion. Back home, on the other hand, Hutu extremists felt betrayed by Habyarimana's signing of the Accords. Thus, whether or not he implemented the agreement, he was still in a difficult situation that he could not ignore.

President Ntaryamira accompanied President Habyarimana in his aircraft on the way back to Kigali. At around 8:30 in the evening on April 6, the aircraft was struck by two missiles. Ironically, it crashed into the garden of Habyarimana's home and caught fire, killing everyone on board. This incident sparked the beginning of the wave of killings that became widely acknowledged as the Rwandan Genocide.

The Genocide of 1994: Rwandan Radio Hate Media

The Hutu-controlled Radio-Television Libres des Milles Collines (RTLMC) was financed by Hutu extremists, which also included Habyarimana. The purpose for this radio station had always been

³⁶ Melvern, 52-54.

to incite the Rwandan Hutu majority to genocide.³⁷ The radio station started calling for the extermination of Tutsi as early as January 1994 in response to the Arusha Accords. After Habyarimana's death, the radio station announcers had a new rallying cry; they called for murder "to avenge the death of their president." On May 5, they declared that the country must be "cleansed" of Tutsis.³⁸

In order to achieve their goal, they helped recruit and organize the Interhamwe militias, whose purpose was to annihilate all Tutsi in Rwanda. Radio announcers read the names and addresses of Tutsi and moderate Hutu who were to be killed. Their last-known locations were also broadcast, and listeners were told, "You have missed some of the enemies [in this or that place]. Some are still alive. You must go back and finish them off."³⁹ The results proved to be one of the worst human disasters ever. Fergal Keane, a journalist and writer, asks his readers:

Remember the figures, never ever forget them, in one hundred days up to one million people were hacked, shot, strangled, clubbed, and burned to death. Remember, carve this into your consciousness: one million. This estimate equates to three hundred and thirty-three and a third murders an hour, or five and a half killings every minute.⁴⁰

The enormity of the bloodshed should have been recognized as genocide immediately, but, due to Rwanda's remote geographic location and its lack of influence in the international arena, thousands of men, women, and children were slaughtered while world powers turned a blind eye. An article in *The Economist* explained that, "The killing in Rwanda is too terrible to ignore. It amounts to genocide, a word that the United States will not

³⁷ Melvern, 71.

³⁸ Peter Ronayne, *Never Again?* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), 157.

³⁹ Ronayne, 158.

⁴⁰ Ronayne, 159.

The Western Media

officially utter since to do so would make it harder to resist taking action.”⁴¹

The Clinton Administration opposed using the term genocide to describe what was taking place in Rwanda at the time. Recognizing this as genocide would require the United States to intervene according to their adoption of the 1948 Genocide Convention. Nevertheless, United States government officials publicly acknowledged that “acts of genocide” may have been committed.⁴² David Rawson, former US Ambassador to Rwanda during this time, said during an interview that “As a responsible government, you don’t just go around hollering genocide. You say that acts of genocide may have occurred and they need to be investigated.”⁴³ While western powers danced around the issue, Hutu extremists carried out their successful agenda at an astonishing rate.

Western Media Coverage of the Genocide

The 1994 Rwandan Genocide officially started when President Habyarimana was killed. The Hutu extremists who supported him blamed the Tutsi for his murder and wasted no time in trying to rid Rwanda of Tutsi. Western media reported the violence as “a product of tribal factions.”⁴⁴ The *New York Times*, for example, on April 9, 1994, headlined “Terror Convulses Rwandan Capital as Tribes Battle.” The article understated events, citing “tribal bloodletting” as the cause for the high death toll and also for the evacuation of foreigners from Kigali, Rwanda’s capital. The reporter, who clearly lacked an understanding of Rwanda’s long history of Hutu-Tutsi conflict, attributed the violence simply to the murder of President Habyarimana. In fact, tension between Hutu and Tutsi had been building and worsening since the post-World War I entry of Belgium into Rwandan society and Belgium's

⁴¹ “Who Will Save Rwanda,” *The Economist*, June 25, 1994, 13.

⁴² Douglas Jehl, “Officials Told to Avoid Calling Rwanda Killings ‘Genocide.’” *New York Times*, June 10, 1994.

⁴³ Jehl.

⁴⁴ Niranjana Karnik, “Rwanda & the Media: Imagery, War & Refuge,” *Review of African Political Economy* 25 (December 1998): 614.

implementation of policies that included: inscribing “ethnic” identification on identity cards; relegating the vast majority of Hutu to onerous forms of forced labor; and favoring Tutsi in access to administrative posts, education, and jobs in the modern sector.⁴⁵

In another article titled, “Africa Has Yet to Come to Terms with Its Tribal Divisions,” the author stated, “Rwanda is African tribalism in its extreme form.”⁴⁶ A news article in the *San Francisco Chronicle* also incorrectly referenced the genocide as a “tribal vendetta.”⁴⁷ On the same day, the *New York Times* also incorrectly referred to the genocide as a tribal war.⁴⁸ In point of fact, the Hutu and Tutsi should not be referred to as different tribes. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, a tribe is defined as “a group of persons forming a community and claiming descent from a common ancestor.” The Hutu and Tutsi lived in the same community, spoke the same language, and shared the same religion.

An article featured in the *Boston Globe* stated, “The Troubles in Rwanda and Burundi go back 500 years, to the time when the tall Tutsi came in from neighboring Ethiopia to establish dominance over the Hutu people.”⁴⁹ Even though some of the physical features of Tutsi and Hutu differed, the two groups had been living together and co-mingling in Rwanda when the Europeans arrived. Moreover, recall that under Belgian policy, the Hutu could be classified as Tutsi merely as a result of their wealth. The classification system that was created never accurately represented the population, thus to describe the genocide as a “tribal war or tribal conflict” is an incorrect description of what occurred. The article below appeared in the *New York Times* one month after the genocide began and exemplifies the language used to describe this event.

⁴⁵ Catharine Newbury, “Background to Genocide: Rwanda,” *A Journal of Opinion*, 23 (1995): 12-17.

⁴⁶ Jonathan Power, “Africa Has Yet To Come To Terms With Its Tribal Divisions” *The Gazette*, final edition, B5, July 30, 1994.

⁴⁷ “Rwanda Struggle to Regain Balance/New Government Named, but Many More Massacred in Tribal Vendettas,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, final edition, April 9, 1994.

⁴⁸ “Terror Convulses Rwandan Capital as Tribes Battle,” *New York Times*, late edition, April 9, 1994.

⁴⁹ “Ethnic War in Africa” *Boston Globe*, April 13, 1994,16.



A young Tutsi, one of more than 1,000 who have taken refuge in a seminary from Hutu carrying out "ethnic cleansing," huddling under a blanket. The seminary, in the Rwandan capital, is surrounded by Hutu soldiers.

Tribal Fighting Flares Again Around the Rwandan Capital

NAIROBI, Kenya, May 15 (Reuter) — Rebel forces in Rwanda are poised to begin new attacks against Government troops, diplomats said today. "They seem to be advancing from several areas," one African diplomat said after a day of artillery duels and small-arms fire around Kigali, capital of the small central African state. Government artillery barrages failed to dislodge the rebels, fighting from positions around the airport east of the capital, and in the surrounding hills.

Isolation as a Tactic
Apart from tightening their noose around the major army barracks at Kanombe, east of the airport, the rebels have not advanced into Kigali since April. The mainly Tutsi rebel forces, lighter armed but highly mobile, have instead concentrated on cutting major roads and capturing rural areas in the north and south-east.

The fighting began on April 6, when President Juvénal Habyarimana, a Hutu, died in a suspicious plane crash near Kigali. The Hutu then began a slaughter of countless thousands of Tutsi and their allies in Hutu-based opposition parties.

Some aid workers estimate that the death toll may have reached 200,000 people.

The United Nations Security Council is expected to vote on Tuesday on a proposal to send up to 5,500 African

troops to try to curb the bloodshed. But while the United States wants the soldiers deployed along Rwanda's borders to create safe havens for refugees, the United Nations wants them to secure Kigali airport first. Residents said reports of the latest rebel advances put them as close as 12 miles to the southwestern town Gitarama, seat of the Government since soon after President Habyarimana's death. "Politically, that would create disarray in the Government camp," a military analyst said. United Nations officials said there was also heavy fighting in Tumba and Nkumba, just east of the major Government garrison in Ruhengeri.

Drunken Militiamen
But in Government-held areas, aid workers speculated, the bloodshed could be easing, perhaps only because so many Tutsi have already been killed or have fled the country.

A reporter in southwestern Rwanda said some drunken Hutu militiamen with grenades, guns and machetes had become a law unto themselves. Even Government soldiers and the police seemed to defer to them at the frequent roadblocks, which have been set up to look for Tutsi, who are savagely killed.

Aid workers say the militiamen are preventing Tutsi civilians from being rescued from the camps, churches and hotels where they have sought protection. "This is one of the reasons why we're hopeful the Security Coun-



Rebel forces control positions in the hills around Kigali.

cil will increase our numbers on the ground so we can patrol such areas," Abdul Kabia, executive director of the 450-member United Nations Assistance Mission in Rwanda, said in a telephone interview.

United Nations officials said the lawless Hutu militias posed the greatest threat to foreign peacekeepers. "We are getting co-operation from the warring parties but I don't know if anybody is in control of the civilian militias," Mr. Kabia said.

He said a United Nations force could quickly secure Kigali airport because both the Government and the rebels had agreed to the idea in principle. United Nations officials said the African force would be backed up by armored personnel carriers and 16 helicopters.

Figure 1. Michael McMahon, "Tribal Fighting Flares Again Around the Rwandan Capital," *New York Times*, late edition, 16 May 1994.

Prolonged Civil War or Genocide?

Raphael Lemkin, a Polish jurist who lost forty-nine family members in the Holocaust, first used the word "genocide."⁵⁰ The term has been used to describe, "the systematic targeting of

⁵⁰ Samantha Power, "Raising the Cost of Genocide" in *Fifty Years of Dissent*, edited by Nicolaus Mills and Michael Walzer, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 295.

national, ethnic, or religious groups.”⁵¹ The United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, to include, however, has defined the term, more broadly:

Any of a number of acts committed with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group: killing members of the group; causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group, and forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.⁵²

It is the totality of the intended extermination that marks genocide.

The intention and attempt of the Hutu to annihilate the entire Tutsi population is clearly an example of genocide, yet the media often portrayed this crisis as a civil war, implying that two opposing political viewpoints had taken up arms simply to gain control of the government. Three months after the genocide began, *USA Today* headlined “Rwandan Rebels Call for Civil War Cease-Fire.”⁵³ *The Gazette* used the same mischaracterization in an article entitled, “Toll From Rwanda’s Civil War Nears 3 Million, UN Says.”⁵⁴ The *Washington Post* published an editorial that identified the violence as “savage civil war.”⁵⁵ The labeling of Africans as savages was started with the Europeans during the pre-colonial era. Although colonialism is a thing of the past, western media continued to use these terms to describe the genocide. Mark

⁵¹ Power, 295.

⁵² United Nations, *Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide* (New York: United Nations, 1948).

<http://www.un.org/millennium/law/iv-1.htm> (accessed May 31, 2010).

⁵³ Charmagne Helton, “Rwandan Rebels Call For Civil War Cease-Fire” *USA Today*, July 6, 1994, final ed., 1A.

⁵⁴ “Toll From Rwanda’s Civil War Nears 3 Million, UN Says” *The Gazette*, May 14, 1994.

⁵⁵ “The Best News Out of Rwanda,” editorial, *Washington Post*, July 15, 1994 final ed., A20.

The Western Media

Doyle, a British journalist, recalls a conversation that he had with a BBC presenter:

There are two wars going on here. There's a shooting war and a genocide war. The two are connected, but also distinct. In the shooting war, there are two conventional armies at each other, and in the genocide war, one of those armies – the governments side with help from civilians – is involved in mass killings.⁵⁶

Rwanda had been involved in a civil war from 1990-1993. The actions and goals of the Hutu extremists in 1994, however – to exterminate all Tutsis – made the million deaths in 1994 genocide and not merely the continuation of a civil war. Mahmood Mamdani, professor of anthropology and international affairs at Columbia University, wrote:

But whereas these Hutu were murdered as individuals— butchered for their beliefs or their actions—the Tutsi were murdered because they were Tutsi. This is why the killings of more than half a million Rwandan Tutsi between March and July of 1994 must be called genocide.⁵⁷

"War" and "genocide" are not simply two variations of the same behavior and the media's characterization of the 1994 events in Rwanda as "civil war" necessarily misled and misinformed Western audiences. In the Western mind, war is an activity involving two or more opposing sets of organized combatants or warriors who might contest land, property, or political supremacy. War involves accepted rules of engagement, the taking and humane treatment of prisoners who are returned at the conclusion of hostilities, and perhaps most importantly, the idea that civilians

⁵⁶ Mark Doyle, "Reporting the Genocide" in *The Media and the Rwanda Genocide* (London: Pluto Press, 2007), 145.

⁵⁷ Mahmood Mamdani "A Brief History of Genocide" *Transition* 10, no.3 (2001): 26.

are off limits to the warriors. The loser in a war surrenders and is not exterminated.

Genocide, on the other hand, is directed at the civilians as it aims to exterminate rather than to imprison, to annihilate rather than to capture. It is not land or political powers that those engaged in genocide seek; rather, it is the total elimination of the existence of the persons who are the objects of the genocide. Western audiences were deceived by a "war" characterization that distorted, and in the process minimized, what was actually occurring in Rwanda.

The Genocide and its Representation of Africa

Africa is often depicted to Westerners as a place of destruction, death, and deprivation. Westerners should not be led to believe such characteristics represent the entire continent. Nonetheless, some journalists reported the genocide as if it took place in all of Africa rather than in one specific country. The *Salt Lake Tribune* published an article titled, "Map of Africa Shifts As More Wars Break Out African Map Runs Red; Wars Erupt Among Incompatibles."⁵⁸ The same newspaper also issued another article one day later headlined, "Foreigners Flee As Blood Flows in Rwanda Stench of Death Everywhere As Rebels Advance; U.S. Sends Troops to Burundi Americans Flee For Their Lives From Africa's Land of Death."⁵⁹ These headlines give the impression that the entire African continent was affected by the genocide and not just the country where it was taking place. The cartoon image below was featured in the *Christian Science Monitor* when the Rwandan Genocide first started. Garth Myers, Thomas Klak and Timothy Koehl argue that this image highlights the exaggerated misconceptions that all of Africa is experiencing the same crises.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ "Map of Africa Shifts As More Wars Break Out African Map Runs Red; Wars Erupt Among Incompatibles," *Salt Lake Tribune*, April 9, 1994.

⁵⁹ "Foreigners Flee As Blood Flows In Rwanda Stench Of Death Everywhere As Rebels Advance; U.S. Sends Troops To Burundi Americans Flee For Their Lives From Africa's Land of Death," *Salt Lake Tribune*, April 10, 1994.

⁶⁰ Garth Myers, Thomas Klak and Timothy Koehl, "The Inscription of Difference: News Coverage of the Conflicts in Rwanda and Bosnia," *Political Geography*, 15, no. 1 (1996): 37.

The Western Media

A mother and her child are seen emerging from the continent without any specific geographic context as to where the genocide was actually occurring. These types of depictions send a clear message about the way Western media views Africa, especially in a time of crisis.



Figure 2: Image reprinted from Christian Science Monitor⁶¹

Conclusion

The Rwandan Genocide represents both an international and media failure. As acts of genocide were perpetrated, Western powers ignored what was happening and the Western media continued to report the situation inaccurately and without any context. The role of Belgian colonialism had created divisions within Rwandan society that segregated persons who were not members of separate tribes, but people who had lived and worked together for centuries before the Europeans arrived.

The media, however, overlooked and over-simplified the origins of the genocide, and in so doing, misled Western audiences. California State University Fullerton professor Ronald Pahl states, “What is neglected or ignored in the reporting on

⁶¹ Myers, Klak and Koehl, 37.

Cherice Joyann Estes

Africa are the issues that have caused these problems for the African nations.”⁶² As long as Western media continue to portray the continent in this manner, the rest of the world will never be able to understand accurately the underlying reality of Africa and its issues.

⁶² Ronald H. Pahl, “The Image of Africa in Our Classrooms” *Social Studies*, 86, no. 6 (1995:Nov./Dec.)

Bibliography

“The Best News Out of Rwanda.” Editorial, *Washington Post*, July 15, 1994.

Chaon, Anne “Who Failed in Rwanda, Journalists or the Media?” In *The Media and the Rwanda Genocide*, edited by Allan Thompson, London: Pluto Press, 2007.

Doyle, Mark “Reporting the Genocide” In *The Media and the Rwanda Genocide*, edited by Allan Thompson, 145-159. London: Pluto Press, 2007.

“Ethnic War in Africa.” *Boston Globe*, April 13, 1994.

“Foreigners Flee As Blood Flows In Rwanda Stench Of Death Everywhere As Rebels Advance; U.S. Sends Troops To Burundi Americans Flee For Their Lives From Africa’s Land of Death,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, April 10, 1994.

Hammock, John C. and Joel R. Charny. “Emergency Response as Morality Play: The Media, the Relief Agencies, and the Need for Capacity Building.” In *From Massacres to Genocide*. Washington D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1996.

Helton, Charmagne. “Rwandan Rebels Call For Civil War Cease-Fire.” *USA Today*, July 6, 1994.

Jehl, Douglas. “Officials Told to Avoid Calling Rwanda Killings Genocide.” *New York Times*, June 10, 1994.

Karnik, Niranjana. “Rwanda & the Media: Imagery, War & Refuge.” *Review of African Political Economy* 25 (December 1998): 611-623.

- Mamdani, Mahmood. "A Brief History of Genocide." *Transition* 10, No. 3 (2001): 26-47.
- "Map of Africa Shifts As More Wars Break Out African Map Runs Red; Wars Erupt Among Incompatibles." *Salt Lake Tribune*, April 9, 1994.
- McMahon, Michael. "Tribal Fighting Flares Again Around the Rwandan Capital," *New York Times*, May 16, 1994.
- Melvorn, Linda. *A People Betrayed: The Role of the West in Rwanda's Genocide*. London: Zed Books, 2000.
- Myers, Garth, Thomas Klak, and Timothy Koehl. "The Inscription of Difference: News Coverage of the Conflicts in Rwanda and Bosnia." *Political Geography* 15, No. 1 (1996): 37.
- Newbury, Catharine. "Background to Genocide: Rwanda." *A Journal of Opinion* 23 (1995): 12-17.
- Pahl, Ronald H. "The Image of Africa in Our Classrooms." *Social Studies* 86, No. 6 (November/December 1995): 245-247.
- Power, Jonathan. "Africa Has Yet To Come To Terms With Its Tribal Divisions." *The Gazette*, 30 (July 1994).
- Power, Samantha. "Raising the Cost of Genocide." In *Fifty Years of Dissent*, Edited by Nicolaus Mills and Micheal Walzer. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004.
- Prunier, Gerard. *The Rwanda Crisis: History of a Genocide*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1995.
- Ronayne, Peter. *Never Again?: The United States and the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide Since the Holocaust*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001.

The Western Media

“Rwanda Struggle to Regain Balance/New Government Named, but Many More Massacred in Tribal Vendettas.” *San Francisco Chronicle*, Final Edition, April 9, 1994.

“Terror Convulses Rwandan Capital as Tribes Battle.” *New York Times*, April 9, 1994.

“Toll From Rwanda’s Civil War Nears 3 Million, UN Says.” *The Gazette*, May 14, 1994.

United Nations, *Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide*, New York: United Nations, 1948.

Wall, Melissa. “An Analysis of News Magazine Coverage of the Rwanda Crisis in the United States.” In *The Media and the Rwanda Genocide*, edited by Allan Thompson, London: Pluto Press, 2007.

“Who Will Save Rwanda?” *The Economist*, June 25, 1994.

Cherice Joyann Estes



Cherice Estes is a graduate student in the M.A. in Social Sciences program at CSUSB. She is currently completing her Master's thesis, which focuses on the media images of sub-Saharan Africa. She worked as an intern for NBC News in San Francisco while an undergraduate student at

San Francisco State University and received funding from the National Science Foundation to participate in the "Master the Doctorate" summer research program at UCLA in 2009. Under the direction of UCLA Professor Edmond Keller, Cherice conducted research on the Rwandan Genocide and presented her research findings at the annual UCLA Summer Programs for Undergraduate and Graduate Research Conference. These experiences provided her with specific knowledge in identifying western media trends in their reporting on African issues. Her future career goals include working for a federal agency or NGO that focuses on humanitarian issues and international development in underdeveloped countries.

