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AFRICAN IDENTITY AND SECURITY
CHALLENGES

Research article

**ETHNOGENESIS AND THE WAR IN RWANDA.
THE POLICIES OF OTHERNESS**

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Abstract. Anthropological analysis has long rested on the premise that cultural borders were somehow linear, based on bounds between people who essentially shared a common culture, with particular differences distinguishing each cohort from all others. Accordingly, identity bounds would possibly find direct representation in geopolitical borders.

Mainstream public discourse absorbed such a perspective, reproducing the simplistic view that geographical borders and social isolation of aggregates were the critical factors in defining cultural diversity and similarity between peoples. Social anthropologists, for their part, obliquely supported such a vision by adopting a highly vague concept of “society.”

The work of Fredrik Barth, among others, marked the transition to a new era of ethnographic studies, parting with anthropological notions of cultures as isolated entities and ethnicity as a primordialist bond. From then on, analysis of categorical ethnic distinctions did not depend anymore on the absence of mobility, contact, or interaction, but rather on the ongoing negotiations between communities as a key factor structuring identity bounds. African post-colonial studies provided the most valuable materials for the consideration of the social ontology of ethnicity, which is here analyzed with a particular focus on Rwanda. Such analytical tools, here integrated with a post-structuralist discourse theory, are still crucial to prevent essentialism, ethnicism, racism, and culturalism as means of social discrimination in the context of the ethno-states.

Keywords: culturalism, epistemology, ethnicity, Fredrik Barth, social anthropology, Rwanda, race

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INTRODUCTION

The concept of ethnicity is suffering from some kind of anachronism. As ethnic framing has been steadily getting less and less relevant under the academic gaze (where it was born), it seems to have parallelly gained an increased legitimacy both on public and governmental grounds. Starting at least from the second half of the past century, anthropological and ethnographical accounts have been confronted with a deep uncertainty over the meaning (and political consequences) of ethnic labeling, having furthermore to acknowledge a striking complicity with the colonialist and imperialist projects whose domination paradigms ethnicization helped to build and validate.

While contemporary anthropology has gradually gotten rid of ethnicization, it is now in the popular domain that we find an abundance of claims featuring rich catalogues of ethnic proposals. A wide variety of mass culture, for instance, presents books with catalogues of ethnic music, ethnic cuisine, ethnic art, ethnic handicraft, and so on.

But what does this “ethnic” labeling actually represent? When does a war become an ethnic war? What makes a recipe an ethnic recipe? What elements are crucially distinctive for an identity to be considered as an ethnic identity? Hereafter, we will argue it may be nothing else than the consequence of a tendency anthropology itself baptized, not without irony, as “ethnocentrism”—namely, the attitude to consider one’s own culture as the meter to measure all others, involving the habit of ascribing ethnicity statuses to exotic external players, whoever they may be.

Often, such labeling simply represents the pretension to indicate any cultural phenomena coming from any part of the globe other than Europe, the US, Canada, the UK, New Zealand, or Australia, all grouped under the geographically dubious label of “Western” cultures. Under such an ethnocentric gaze, Malaysia or Zambia, Bolivia or Morocco would equally represent as many “ethnic” cultures next to the dominant “Western” culture.

Such a vulgar version of a long-deconsecrated mindset has also made its way into the reports of mainstream newsprints, mass-media channels, and government agencies. From BBC to CNN, from Al Jazeera to Reuters, news reports regularly describe a variety of conflicts, civil uprisings, and guerrilla wars as “ethnic” conflicts, “ethnic” tensions, and so forth.¹ In the ’90s, nearly all reports described the Rwandan genocide as the outcome

¹ See: Why is ethnic violence surging in Ethiopia? *Al Jazeera*. 19.04.2021. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/4/19/why-is-ethnic-violence-surging-in-ethiopia> (accessed: 03.11.2025); Bytyci F. Serbs in Kosovo clash with police as ethnic tensions flare. *Reuters*. 11.12.2022. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/serbs-kosovo-block-roads-clash-with-police-ethnic-tensions-worsen-2022-12-11> (accessed: 03.11.2025); Manipur: Thousands displaced as ethnic clashes grip north-eastern state. *BBC*. 09.05.2023. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-65522719> (accessed: 03.11.2025); Formanek I., El Damanhoury K., Haq S.N. 10,000 reported killed in one West Darfur city, as ethnic violence ravages Sudanese region. *CNN*. 26.07.2023. <https://www.cnn.com/2023/07/26/africa/sudan-west-darfur-thousands-killed-intl> (accessed: 03.11.2025).

of an “ethnic” clash, a fight between ancestrally different, incompatible “ethnic” groups. Something similar happened with the Bosnian civil war. However, on a closer look, most of those conflicts were rather the violent aftermaths of Western imperialism.

Some state institutions seem to perform no better in such categorization of peoples. A few years ago, under a paragraph entitled “Measuring Racial and Ethnic Diversity for the 2020 Census”, the US Census Bureau described its curious analytical methodology, mentioning ethnic and racial criteria as follows: “These diversity calculations require the use of mutually exclusive racial and ethnic (nonoverlapping) categories. For our analyses, we calculate the Hispanic or Latino population of any race as a category; each of the race alone, non-Hispanic groups as individual categories; and the Multiracial non-Hispanic group as a distinct category. The following groups are used in the diversity calculations:

“Hispanic;
White alone, non-Hispanic;
Black or African American alone, non-Hispanic;
American Indian and Alaska Native alone, non-Hispanic;
Asian alone, non-Hispanic;
Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander alone, non-Hispanic;
Some Other Race alone, non-Hispanic;
*Multiracial, non-Hispanic.”*²

What assumptions about ethnicity and race are to support such borders and divisions is yet to be understood. Arguably, people that are united under the “Black or African American” group could very well consider each other as different people if only one of them comes from Somalia and the other one from Senegal. Such uses of racial and ethnic grouping still replicate the analytical standards enhanced by the colonialist paradigm, revived right here in the 21st century.

To mention just one more case, consider a legislative impasse that emerged in a European Commission report on data collection practices in the European Union (EU): “Racial, ethnic and national origin, minority religion, language and cultural traditions have not been clearly distinguished in law, but are instead recognised as intrinsically interlinked. [...] The Permanent Court of International Justice stated that a (minority) community is “a group of persons living in a given country or locality, having a race, religion, language and traditions of their own and united by this identity of race, religion, language and traditions in a sentiment of solidarity, with a view to preserving their traditions, maintaining their form of worship, ensuring the instruction and upbringing of their children in accordance with the spirit and traditions of their race and rendering mutual assistance to each other.”³

² Measuring Racial and Ethnic Diversity for the 2020 Census. *United States Census Bureau*. 04.08.2021. <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/blogs/random-samplings/2021/08/measuring-racial-ethnic-diversity-2020-census.html> (accessed: 23.02.2024)

³ Farkas L. Data collection in the field of ethnicity. *European Commission*. 2017. https://commission.europa.eu/system/files/2021-09/data_collection_in_the_field_of_ethnicity.pdf (accessed: 23.02.2024)

Seen up close, this definition seems able to describe not just any possible minority group, but also any major or minor social community that has ever existed throughout all known history of *Homo sapiens* on the planet. We are given the information that all the subjects of such communities are united in solidarity by cultural traits. Is that actually our ultimate cornerstone with regard to social identity?

ETHNICITY AND GROUPING CRITERIA

In this paragraph, we will discuss the genealogy, purpose, and shift in meaning of the idea of ethnicity as it has been defined in 20th century anthropological theory. We address the function of the category in relation to the earlier notion of race, and highlight the limits that brought to its overcoming across the post-colonial discursive approach at the end of the century.

What the classic paradigm of anthropology meant by the concept of “ethnic group” was roughly a distinguished ensemble of human beings who generally shared a land, a language, a religion, a genealogical bond, and what we could call, more widely, a social structure. A certain number of common criteria were taken into consideration, such as language, a name, customs, land, values, lineage, the awareness of belonging to the group, etc.

One of the best definitions of this period was probably given in the 1940s by British-American anthropologist Ashley Montagu, in his book “Man’s Most Dangerous Myth. The Fallacy of Race”: “An ethnic group represents one of a number of populations comprising the single species *Homo sapiens*, which individually maintain their differences, physical and cultural, by means of isolating mechanisms such as geographic and social barriers. [...] Where these barriers are of low power, neighboring groups will intergrade or hybridize with one another. Where these barriers are of high power, such ethnic groups will tend to remain distinct or to replace each other geographically or ecologically” [Montagu 1997: 186].

In the same work, Montagu describes what kind of criteria are to be considered relevant for distinguishing the groups in the continuum: “The term ‘ethnic group’ denotes a self-perceived social grouping, within or without a larger social grouping, which is distinguished by a variety of traits. These include religious and linguistic characteristics, geographic or national origin, aesthetic cultural patterns, a socially transmitted way of life and sometimes more or less distinctive physical traits. None of these characteristics taken alone constitute an ethnic group. It is the association of all of them that does so” [Montagu 1997: 527].

Not only we can see here a well-defined idea of a human group pursuing a social identity by sharing cultural traits; we also find a pivotal reference to the notion of geographic and social barriers. This attempt to define some purely cultural aggregates as local concrete groups, elaborating representations of a common historical and social identity, still presupposed the existence of such groups on the field. The articulation and association of cultural traits within a community represented therefore the “essence” of each specific group. And this essence was identified for a reason.

In fact, the motive why the concept of ethnic group was proposed in the first place had to do with the need to find an alternative to another identity principle, another kind of essence able to sort people: the dangerous notion of race, which had first been used to distinguish human beings on the basis of biological phenotypical differences, advanced as a distinctive criterion to establish group demarcation. Montagu himself gave an account of those concerns:

“The concept of an ‘ethnic group’ is quite different from that associated with the term race. The phrase ethnic group represents a different way of looking at populations, an open, non-question-begging way [...]. It avoids the reductionist or ‘nothing but’ fallacy, that is to say, the notion that people are nothing but the resultant of their biological heredity [...] The emphasis is shifted to the fact that the human is a uniquely cultural creature as well as a physical organism” [Montagu 1997: 526–527].

With this operation, instead of races, it was now human cultures that began to be considered as juxtaposed mosaic tiles, where every piece was perceived as a homogeneous social aggregate whose members shared a history, a language, a territory, a religion, etc., and on such a basis could claim a common identity. Consequently, every cluster was considered to be different from the next one. Despite some early epistemological criticisms [see Leach 1945], the definitional haziness about what cultural trait should be considered as distinctive to describe a group as an ethnic unit was generally viewed as a virtue, in contrast to the rigid pretensions of the quasi-biological notion of race.

Montagu cites here H.B. English and A.C. English’s “A Comprehensive Dictionary of Psychological and Psychoanalytical Terms”: “Ethnic group is an intentionally vague or general term used to avoid some of the difficulties of race. The ethnic group may be a nation, a people (such as the Jews), a language group (the Navajo Nation), a sociologically defined so-called race (the African American), or a group bound together in a coherent cultural entity by a religion (the Amish)” [Montagu 1997: 525–6].

The adoption of the term “ethnic group” presented, therefore, the advantage of diverting exclusive attention from biometric factors, leaning towards the feelings of familiarity and companionship based on shared cultural materials: “The term *ethnic* is derived from the Greek *ethnos*, meaning a number of people living together, a company, a body of people. In the *Iliad*, Homer variously uses the word to mean a band of comrades, a tribe, a group. Pindar uses it in the sense of a family, a nation, a people” [Montagu 1997: 186].

In Montagu’s intentions, the new proposal would serve the hope of preventing racial prejudice inside the social arena. Unfortunately, however, although the change was no doubt driven by the most noble intentions, we now know too well that it simply substituted the basis for discrimination: it was now ethnicity and culture instead of race.

The openness of the cultural definition of ethnic groups made it possible to establish critical factors able to distinguish and identify human groups on a case-by-case basis. Also, none of those traits was either decisively binding or definitely differentiating: Mexicans and Argentinians may share the same language, yet they consider each others as different people; for centuries Jews around the world were lacking a common land, yet they were frequently considered as one ethnic group; Buddhists in Zhoushan and

Muslims in Lanzhou could all belong to a kind of Chinese identity, despite the religious demarcation; Pathans from Afghanistan and West Pakistan live far away, yet they may have no problem in considering each other as part of the same family; something alike happens with the Hmong people, scattered over Vietnam, China, and Myanmar, let alone the US and South American Guianas. On the contrary, the Arsi, Laki, Amhara, Macha, Shoa Galla all live in Ethiopia, yet they consider themselves as different peoples. Ethnographic evidence is abundant.

In summary, the classical ethnic labeling proposal was meant to describe a number of uniform human groups supposedly identified by the fact of sharing the same “culture” (language, tradition, laws, land, beliefs, etc.). This demarcation principle was resting upon three main assumptions [Barth 1969]:

First, geographical and social isolation were key factors in maintaining cultural difference;

Second, ethnic definition took for granted the absolute, static, unchanging character of such an identity;

Third, nearly no attention was given to the creation and emergence of new cultures, groups, and identities.

In the following decades, with the decolonization of Africa, this perspective entered into crisis, as many scholars underlined the arbitrary and constructed character of ethnic belonging itself, highlighting the political determinants that underlie the very genesis of ethnic groups.

From S.F. Nadel [Nadel 1942] to Meyer Fortes [Fortes 1945], from Paul Mercier [Mercier 1961] to Claude Meillassoux [Meillassoux 1964] and Emmanuel Terray [Terray 1969], until the exhaustive work of J.-L. Amselle and Elikia M'Bokolo, 20th-century anthropologists demonstrated that the practice of ethnic sorting had heavily corresponded to an arbitrary colonialist territorialization and had little to do with any pre-existing social relations among human beings. As early as 1958, William Watson demonstrated that the very constitution of the Mambwe people of Zambia as a tribe was a consequence of British colonization [Watson 1958]. In 1981, Jean-Pierre Dozon showed, studying the Bete people of Côte d'Ivoire, how the term “Bété” had been applied by the French administration to a territory arbitrarily carved out by the invaders within a cultural continuum (see [Dozon 1981; Amselle, M'Bokolo 1985]). Later, through the concept of *ethnoscapes*, Appadurai analyzed the interplay of imagination, power, and identity in the contemporary global processes of the “diasporic public spheres”, defining new forms of cultural hybridity and conflict [Appadurai 1996].

According to some of those researchers, more than a common “essence,” the members of a group would rather share discursive opposition dynamics with other communities, leading to the creation or enhancement of their own identity. Therefore, the very notion of “ethnicity” had to be ontologically reconsidered—when not just dropped, in favor of the analysis of the policies of difference and the policies of identity deployed in each particular case. We will focus below on the specific case of Rwandan ethnic identities as an ethnographical illustration of such dynamics. Although we do not believe that ethnicities in Africa are somehow ontologically different from those in other places in the Global South or elsewhere in the world, we will here address the African post-

colonial context precisely because, after the prompts of Frederik Barth, it was the decolonization of this continent that led contemporary anthropologists to undertake the most relevant advance in theory.

IN-GROUP AND OUT-GROUP: THE OTHERNESS IDENTITY TAKES

Something went missing in Montagu's Greek etymological account on ethnicity. Something little, yet paramount. It is the context of where and how the term "ethnos" was used. In other words, the social meaning, or function, of such a term. As noticed by sociologist Anne-Marie Fortier, the word "*ethnos*" [ἔθνος], meaning "*people, nation, class, caste, tribe; or a number of people accustomed to live together,*" was used as part of a specific action in the ancient world: the practice of naming other people, namely *inferior* people, *barbarian* people. The clarification is not a meaningless one: "This early use would often describe people whose location or conduct was in some way outside of 'the sphere of the Greek social normality.' Aristotle used it for foreign or barbarous nations, whereas Herodotus did not use the term *ethnos* when describing the Greeks. In the New Testament, *ethnos* is used to mean non-Christian or non-Jewish, Gentile, heathen. "Ethnikos" then appeared to be almost synonymous with *barbaros*" [Fortier 1994: 213].

Fortier further explains that it was only later, when the Greeks were representing the most prominent religious "other" under the Ottoman Empire, that such use changed. Interestingly, *ethnos* and ethnocentrism have coincided since the very beginning. We will argue this attitude may actually be connected with the notion of identity itself, and more precisely that ethnicity can be considered as a mode of the opposition identity/otherness, in-group/out-group in the same cognitively structural sense that was explored by Françoise Héritier [1996] with regards to the masculine-feminine demarcation.

But let's now step back to ethnic grouping and barriers. We've seen how the essentialist view on ethnic groups defined them as units emanating "from the inside," from a core or nucleus, homogeneous and separated by social borders. As for the unifying factors, Kevin Yelvington observed that, in the 1970s, two schools were providing an explanation for the creation of such groups: instrumentalism [Cohen 1969] and primordialism [Epstein 1978]: "Instrumentalist models hold that, in the context of socioeconomic change, people with common interests form groups to pursue those interests, with ethnicity being the most effective unifying principle for the appeals to be made. In contrast, primordialists point to the potent, emotive symbols ethnicity entails and argue that, in the context of disorienting social change, people retire to their ethnic identity to meet emotional needs" [Yelvington 1991: 159].

In those same years, new definitions were developed, investigating the processes of historical, social, and symbolic interactions through which human cohorts perceived and represented not so much their own identity within the group, but rather their relations with other human ensembles. In particular, Fredrik Barth argued that ethnic identities and borders were precisely emerging by means of interaction, claiming they were the product of an interplay rather than isolation: "An empirical investigation [...] produces two discoveries which are hardly unexpected but which demonstrate the inadequacy of this

view. First, it is clear that boundaries persist despite a flow of personnel across them [...]. Secondly, one finds that stable, persisting and often vitally important social relations are maintained across such boundaries, and are frequently based precisely on the dichotomized ethnic statuses. In other words, ethnic distinctions do not depend on an absence of social interactions and acceptance, but are quite to the contrary often the very foundations on which embracing social systems are built” [Barth 1969: 9–10].

In the border-frontier dialectic, we consider the metaphor of borders as representing the criteria defining demarcation lines (or demarcation claims) and the metaphor of frontiers as portraying the access points culturally established to allow for the bridging of identities: the socially defined crossing protocols available to social agents. Liminality areas do represent a particularly challenging object of analysis, precisely as their existence does not call into question identity distinctions or cultural borders.

Interesting cases of double belonging to different groups came to confirm Barth’s definitions, where behaviors and beliefs belonging to distinct identities may be successfully integrated in one living subject but keep on being ascribed and categorized according to former ethnic distinctions: “Soraya married a Muslim missionary. [...] Despite her reconciliation with her Maranao identity, she still feels uncomfortable around many Maranao and resents what she perceives as their rejection of her. [...] She says she is determined to integrate herself in two cultures, Maranao tradition and Western modernism, retaining the positive aspects of Maranao custom and rejecting those that impede progress, including traditional marriage practices” [Bentley 1987: 32].

Anthropological literature further shows that cultural border crossings are indeed possible and happen according to given protocols, yet also in those cases ethnic distinctions are the usual tool applied to define belongings and relations. Even in short-term contexts, like the construction of consensus in an electoral period, individuals switching from one ethnic identity to another do not seem to form new ones through recombination [see Ferree 2012].

According to Barth, ethnic units are precisely *organizational types* within which social relations are structured. “Ethnic groups are categories of ascription and identification by the actors themselves, and thus have the characteristic of organizing interaction between people” [Barth 1969: 10]. Thinking of culture as a way to describe human behavior, one has then to expect that those behaviors and traits could change according to the wider context, an environment defined by political partnerships, economic ties, marriage alliances, migrations, etc.

From this perspective, the elements one ascribes to the in-group largely depend on the contextual otherness they relate to. What validates the ethnic group (or ethnic identity claims) is therefore the border itself, which depends on an external dynamic touchstone and is not called into question by the existence of a frontier allowing for the mediated blending with the otherness.

Michael Moerman provided a reflection based on some US reciprocal ethnic labelings: “In order to call themselves by an ethnic label, villagers are semantically required to use or imply a contrastive label for others. To phrase the issue somewhat more generally and accurately, using one member of a set of identifications provides the context which makes other members of that set appropriate. Using the label “Negro”

provides the context which makes labels like “White” or “Mexican” appropriate” [Moerman 1968: 62].

Some fifteen years earlier, this interaction was also described by Frantz Fanon as the cornerstone of the construction of a submissive Black identity, produced by the white man in a hierarchical narrative of domination. Paradoxically, European colonial administration and education produced a narrative of Blackness that became the standard adopted by Black people to think about themselves, stuck in what he called “an arsenal of complexes that has been developed by the colonial environment” [Fanon 1986 (1952): 30]. “The Negro,” he wrote, “is unaware of it as long as his existence is limited to his own environment; but the first encounter with a white man oppresses him with the whole weight of his blackness” [Fanon 1986: 150].

More than specific cultural traits, ethnic groups were sustained by the articulation of the identical/different, in-group/out-group structure, both cognitively and socially. Distinction, demarcation, differentiation claims may well be considered the nucleus of identity borders. According to a strategic selection of traits and belongings, the same subject can then be considered as pertaining to several different groups and be equally excluded from others, sometimes with significant overlappings. Consequently, “similarities in habitus do not guarantee ethnic sensations, and differences in habitus do not preclude identification” [Yelvington 1991: 168].

Following Barth’s approach, the way was paved for the consideration of ethnicity as a context-sensitive, dynamic, political representation of identity. Foreshadowing some themes and perspectives of the discursive postcolonial African analysis that was just about to come, and particularly the interpretation of ethnicity as a narrative (and more: whose narrative?), Fredrik Barth further suggested that ethnic divisions and narratives could actually be *inducted* within a certain society: “What is needed to make ethnic distinctions emerge in an area? 1. a categorization of population sectors in exclusive and imperative status categories; 2. an acceptance of the principle that standards applied to one such category can be different from those applied to another” [Barth 1969: 17].

Ethnicity, in other words, results from a social ontology.

MAKING UP ETHNICITIES: RWANDAN COLONIZATION

In the 1980s, a new tradition of anthropologists brought to completion the deconstruction of ethnicity as an epistemological tool. They did so by highlighting the relevance of the relationships between global historical-economic processes and local dynamics, on the basis of which human groups discursively define their own identity or have it defined and imposed by external forces [Amselle, M’Boloko 1985]. It was shown how the concept of ethnicity had been the manifestation of an ideological grammar that reified historical processes and represented projects of socio-cultural identity, intended as the expression of concrete relationships of political influence, power, and strength.

The history of the European colonization of the African continent provided numerous cases of local groups of people that had been arbitrarily named and grossly made up, according to military agendas, embarrassing misinterpretations of social systems, and exploitative, predatory political interests: “When it comes to ethnicities, we are in the

presence of moving realities: here as elsewhere, no one is exclusively a member of an ethnic group, and individuals, like social groups, are or cease to be, depending on the place and time, members of one or another ethnic group. Ultimately, it is ethnology and colonialism that, by ignoring history or denying it, anxious to classify and name, have thus established ethnic labels” [Amselle, M’Bokolo 1985: 10].

The notorious Rwandan genocide represents a paradigmatic illustration of the lethal, discursive deployment of ethnic groups and boundaries at the hands of a political agenda.

In October 1990, a civil war began when the Tutsi-led Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) attacked Rwanda, entering from Uganda. The aggression of the RPF, which was composed of Tutsi descendants grown up in exile, had the purpose of putting an end to the one-party state controlled by the Hutu elite and allowing for the return of Tutsi refugees [Reydams 2021: 237]. Ever since 1994, when the mass killings started, British and US reports, among others, described the situation as a typical case of tribal, ethnic violence in Africa, a cruel fight between two ancestral ethnic groups divided by primordial antagonisms.

However, not only have scholars pointed out that “ethnic accounts or a ‘racial’ explanation of the genocide are untenable,” that “ethnic conflict had to be engineered” in Rwanda, and that “the cause is political and not social” [Hintjens 1999: 281], but also the very meaning of the Hutu/Tutsi distinction underwent intense historical and anthropological scrutiny. Social divisions in the region were an earlier phenomenon, dating back to the period before the genocide and even before Rwandan independence of 1962. However, the meaning, the function, and the criteria of such separation have been heavily modified first by European imperialism and afterwards by the ruling local elite.

When German and Belgian colonizers arrived in the region, in the last decades of the 1800s, a peculiar social-political system existed on the ground. It was an order based on the interdependence of three groups: shepherds, farmers, and hunter-gatherers. The shepherds were mostly Tutsi; the farmers, who constituted the majority of the population of the kingdom, were Hutu; the hunter-gatherers represented a small minority and were Twa pygmies. Bahutu, Batutsi, and Batwa were not three “ethnic groups” in the sense examined above, or at least, not yet: “What sunders the Hutus, Tutsis, and Twas is not language or religion but socioeconomic difference. It is eerily similar to the estate difference, which used to separate Catholic serf-peasants and Catholic Polish-Lithuanian nobles in the Austrian Empire’s crownland of Galicia until the mid-19th century” [Kamusella 2021: 12].

Yet, the invaders attributed to this social division not only a hierarchical but also a “racial” meaning, according to their own assumptions: “German and Belgian colonial administrators shared the stereotypical Western preconception that Africa was a kind of Europe at an ‘earlier or lower stage of development.’ [...] Hence, they tended to interpret the social—or rather, socioeconomic—difference between Tutsi and Hutus in the ‘medieval’ or ‘feudal’ terms of the ancien régime social order of unequal estates. [...] In this Eurocentric view, Tutsis were none other but nobles (lords), while Hutus were perceived to be serfs (vassals) of Tutsis” [Kamusella 2021: 13].

Tutsis were considered the politically pre-eminent group, as the kings and officials came from their aristocracy. From the Hutu aristocracy came the priests, who were in

charge of the rituals that ensured the well-being of the sovereign. When European colonizers took over, they abolished both the Tutsi monarchy and the ritual role of the Hutus: “In the spirit of the Rassenkunde (“science of race”), then quite popular in Europe and across the west, the German colonialists introduced to Rwanda and Burundi the myth that Hutus were local Bantus (“blacks”), while Tutsis supposedly stemmed from Ethiopia or even Mesopotamia. In this colonial arrangement, the latter were considered “whites,” or at least “white blacks,” in contrast to through and through “black” Hutus” [Kamusella 2021: 14].

Looking for interlocutors to exercise their political influence, they turned to the kings, that is, the Tutsis. The Tutsi aristocracy then converted to Catholicism, abandoning its ancient religion and accordingly acquiring a new power over the rest of the population, based on the exclusive and complicit relationship with the colonizers. They were further ensured economic advantages and, in some cases, a European education. Hutus, by contrast, remained excluded from those privileges and found themselves as simple peasants with no other social meaning left than the function of being exploited by the Tutsi rulers under European direction. “The royal courts of Rwanda and Burundi, which had been seeking to centralize and consolidate their rule even before the arrival of the Europeans, recognized a clear opportunity and sought to reinforce the mistaken European interpretations of Rwandan society. Rwandan intellectuals worked with Catholic missionaries to develop a history that would conform to European racial expectation” [Longman 2002: 351].

Historian Tomasz Kamusella showed how, under such sway, local precolonial social institutions of *uburetwa* and *ubuhake*, relations of forced labor and unequal patronage, have been taken over by the colonialists to serve as useful instruments of indirect rule, especially for extracting taxes from the territory [2021: 13-14]. In doing so, colonizers changed the meaning of such traditions, relations, and identities, ignoring that, unlike in the European medieval model, *uburetwa* and *ubuhake* did not prohibit social mobility. The notion of two “exclusive and incompatible Hutu and Tutsi identities was constructed gradually,” wrote Helen Hintjens. “Such identities came to be perceived as polar opposites, where once they had been based on material relations of unequal but mutual inter-dependence” [Hintjens 1999: 251]. Moreover, “in pre-colonial Burundi, the same individual could be both Tutsi in relation to clients, and Hutu in relation to patrons” [Hintjens 249–250].

In the 1930s, colonizers implemented a “rationalization” of labor and revenue extraction, requiring “bureaucratization and ubiquitous control over spatial and social movement, which led to the gradual introduction of ‘identity booklets’” [Kamusella 2021: 14]. Those Identity Cards mandatorily featured a rigid, univocal “race/tribe” affiliation to one of three available kinds: Hutu, Tutsi, or Twa.

Identity documentation was common practice for colonial governments in Africa, first launched by Dutch settlers in the Cape Colony in the 1700s to regulate the supply of labor [Longman 2002: 347]. As Timothy Longman puts it, “The British and Belgians ruled most of their territories through a system known as ‘indirect rule’, in which indigenous leaders were left in place and used to administer colonial policies. Indirect rule, however, required both clearly defined ethnic groups and clearly defined indigenous

leaders, conditions that were frequently not in place. Hence, the colonial governments set about carefully defining regional boundaries and categorizing Africans by ethnicity, and where necessary they created both groups and ‘traditional’ leaders” [Longman 2002: 349].

However, in their political effort to define who belonged to one group or another, Europeans found a widely blended population, where mixed marriages and concubinage made it impossible to sort out subjects according to their beloved phenotypical criteria. Despite an unrealistic attempt to differentiate between taller and shorter sizes, or clearer and darker skin color, in the 1933–1934 census the invaders ended up sorting up people into two “ethnic groups” based on the number of cattle possessed by each family: those who owned more than ten animals were classified as ethnically Tutsi; people who possessed less than ten were listed as ethnically Hutu. That was the actual demarcating criteria to attribute ethnic identity: “Belgian colonial administrators so despaired of being able to distinguish Batutsi from Bahutu, that they introduced a means-tested system of ethnic identification. Any man with more than ten head of cattle was to be permanently classified as Tutsi, and any man with fewer than ten cattle as Hutu or Twa, depending on their profession” [Hintjens 1999: 253].

Civil rights and political privileges were delivered accordingly by the colonial administrations [Newbury 1987; De Waal 1994]. Suddenly, “to be Hutu in Belgian Ruanda-Urundi meant to be denied opportunities for education and employment, to completely lack political power, to pay heavy taxes, and to be kept in an economically marginalized position” [Longman 2002: 353]. This was built on the propagation of what Catharine Newbury called a “corporate vision of ethnic groups”: “Tutsi, Hutu, and Twa came to be viewed as internally homogeneous groups, and their members came to be treated in distinctive ways by the state. This made groups that had previously shown more internal flexibility appear more like biological groups” [Newbury 1998: 11].

CIVIL WAR: NEW CRISIS, OLD MASKS

The situation was symmetrically reversed after 1962 independence, with the progressive decolonization of the region. In early 1960, Belgian authorities oversaw the replacement of most Tutsi chiefs with Hutu and organized mid-year elections, which returned an overwhelming Hutu majority. In the new republic controlled by a Hutu ruling class, a period of unrestrainable violence began [Fabietti 2004: 169]. Tutsis started leaving the country to escape the Hutu purges, settling in the four neighboring countries: Burundi, Uganda, Tanzania, and Zaire.

It is noteworthy that the new scenario did not bring about the abolition of the ethnic distinctions as defined by the colonizers. When a group of activists issued a “Hutu Manifesto” just before independence, in 1957, their demands for equality of all Rwandans still adopted the racialist terminology [Newbury 1998: 12]. The Manifesto recognized that “poor Tutsi shared many of the problems of poor Hutu” and included the Twa in its demands for human rights, but still “defended the need for racial markers on identity cards and asked that these be retained after independence as a protective measure.” “Gradually, the Bahutu elite came to regard itself as the only authentic

indigenous leadership of Rwanda, and the Bahutu as the only true “sons of the soil”. Curiously, this claim of historical legitimacy ignored the prior claims of the minority Batwa, almost certainly the earliest inhabitants of the Great Lakes area” [Hintjens 1999: 264–254].

Despite President Habyarimana’s regime’s trying to dampen ethnic tensions, a deep state crisis brought the country to the 1990s violence. When another crisis of governance resulted in a struggle over who would control the state, “contenders for power tried to mobilize their constituencies using an appeal to solidarity based this time, as in 1959, on ethnic identity,” although no methodical class violence occurred this time [Newbury 1998: 17–18]. Newbury also notes: “Tutsi were discriminated against in education and access to government jobs; but before October 1990, systematic harassment of Tutsi was not characteristic of the Habyarimana regime. At that time, Tutsi did not face exclusion from private sector employment or local-level positions in the teaching, agriculture, or medical fields” [Newbury 1998: 15].

At the social-economic level, however, scholars observed that by the 1990s Rwanda state was in terrible shape, primarily due to the pressure of the global financial institutions dominated by the Western states: “In June 1990, the government finally yielded to World Bank/IMF pressure to implement a package of structural adjustment measures. Rwanda’s national currency was immediately devalued by two-thirds. There was also famine in the south of the country. [...] health services could not be maintained and maternal and infant mortality levels rose sharply [...] there was a dramatic increase in malaria, combined with severe food shortages and an influx of refugees from Burundi. [...] The army increased in size from 7,000 troops in 1989 to more than 30,000 by 1994 [...] French military assistance worsened levels of corruption and encouraged further purchases of military hardware at the expense of many basic necessities” [Hintjens 1999: 257].

Faced with a deep political crisis, the ruling class mobilized the old ethnic discourse, fostering hatred and fear “to divert attention from unresolved contradictions in the country’s political economy,” thus overlooking “questions of power and class” [Newbury 1998: 19]. Propagandistic tales and narratives were spread to polarize public opinion around the myth of an upcoming recolonization: “It was believed that the Tutsi elite were about to [...] conquer and subjugate the indigenous [...] innocent Bahutu. This recolonization would mean the restoration of slavery, and a return to the unquestionable superiority of the Batutsi overlords over the Bahutu majority; in short, a return to the pre-revolutionary past” [Hintjens 1999: 264].

The conflictual narrative around primordial ethnic groups, races, or tribes, as implemented by the colonial policies, became the 1990s “thinkability horizon” provided to desperate citizens to deal with a deep-rooted political crisis of state legitimacy in Rwanda. Then, an unjust, exacerbated socioeconomic difference, “recast by the colonial administration as a racialized estate order [...] culminated in the Rwandan Genocide” [Kamusella 2021: 15].

Moving then back to our wider theoretical point and considering how those groups, their status, and their meanings have been engineered under a political agenda, we keep on asking, endorsing Kamusella: “is a social group the same as an ethnic group? Should

these designations be applied on the basis of research and in light of scholarly definitions?” [Kamusella 2021: 2].

ETHNIC DISCOURSE: POLITICAL AGENDAS AND SCHISMOGENESIS

The historical Rwandan case provides a significant endorsement for the thesis advanced by Barth, Amselle, and M’Bokolo, exhibiting the fictional, discursive, and political nature of ethnic demarcations. Here, an ethnic discourse manipulates cultural traits, ascribing homogeneity by defining and circumscribing an ethnicity or by opposition to another group.

Besides historical colonialist and imperialist top-down impositions, current uses of ethnic ascriptions also have to be taken into serious consideration: “We need an account of ethnicity that explores its modernity. [...] Tamils, Serbs, Sikhs, Malaysians, Basques, and others are all very large groups, are all claimants to nationhood, and are all involved in violent confrontations with existing state structures and other large-scale ethnic groupings. This matrix of large size, nationalist aspiration, and violence characterizes these new ethnicities” [Appadurai 1996: 139].

Since there are no objective criteria to establish an “ethnicity,” rather than asking ourselves “what is ethnic identity?”, we shall better ask “who is using ethnic assignments, in which context, and for what purposes?” As there is no ethnicity out of the ethnic discourse, just as there are no facts out of a narration exposing them, we have to consider that the common history of a people is written and rewritten starting from a transient, situational “us.”

Consider, for instance, actual Moroccan borders and the people living within them: we can easily see how the Moroccan government, the Berbers, the Sahrawis, the Polisario front, or the Arab-Yemeni nomads could be willing to write the same story or five different ethnic stories (if not more). Human relations live in a flow that institutional ethnic discourses try to freeze, photograph, and establish through symbolic language. Thus, ethnicity is also to be identified with the words of the subjects who contextually pronounce an essentialism, a “we are” against a “they are,” with particular purposes and reasons emotionally wrapped around the in-group/out-group distinction.

The creation of an imagined community is a process very well outlined by Benedict Anderson [Anderson 1991], who showed how nationalisms invest so much effort in the creation and maintenance of imagined communities, deeply enforced by the media for people to perceive themselves as part of a specific group, often according to the interests and the agenda of other groups. It is the ideological, spreading model of the ethno-states. We can then see how problematic is the definition associated with the principle of “Self-determination of peoples,” which opens a path for the legitimation and the independence of a local in-group that wishes to emancipate itself from the domination of an out-group, as long as this is manifested under an ethnic outfit and with national state perspectives: the ethno-state.

The most relevant works collected by Amselle and M’Bokolo in 1985 raised a reasonable doubt: were African ethnic boundaries and labels anywhere there before the European invasion? The researchers argued: “There was nothing resembling an

‘ethnicity’ during the pre-colonial period. Ethnicities derive from the action of the colonizer who, in his desire to territorialize the African continent, carved out ethnic entities that were subsequently claimed by the populations. From this perspective, ‘ethnicity,’ like numerous other supposedly primitive institutions, would only represent a further false archaism. But if before colonization there were no ethnic groups, what could we find there? In which frameworks were the social actors organized?” [Amselle, M’Bokolo 1985: 23].

And even more interestingly, the researchers showed that even when the colonizers’ ethnic charting actually corresponded to an existing set of local divisions and group belongings, those names, distinctions, and communities did not have the same local meanings European colonizers were assigning to them in their surveys. We therefore acknowledge that even where some labels had already been employed to describe families and populations, groups and belongings, their social use, meanings, and function were significantly different: “Undoubtedly, we can note a continuity in the use of some categories in the pre-colonial era and in the current one and note a resumption by the colonizer of terms that were already used before his arrival (“Peul”, “Bambara”, “Dioula”, and so on) but this simply highlights the fact that the ethnonym is a “floating signifier” and that its use is of a “performative” nature so that contrasting a specific meaning of an ethnonym with another does not make much sense, until the complete list of social uses of the same term is established” [Amselle, M’Bokolo: 37].

By claiming that ethnic borders can be (and have been) invented, we are not suggesting that ethnicity does not exist. Instead, we shall revive the hermeneutical perspective according to which ethnicity corresponds to an identity narrative for community belonging and/or political planning. As lovely outlined by Yelvington, “ethnicity is a social identity characterized by fictive kinship” [Yelvington 1991: 168].

And once we bring about the concept of kinship, we can only indicate the most remarkable work of Marshall Sahlins, exploring the social dynamics at the very heart of kinship bonds [Sahlins 2013]. Ethnicity is not an empirical fact in the sense of classic scientific realism, meaning it can not be objectively observed, measured, tested, etc. Still, it is real in a sense that goes well beyond such materialism: it is a feeling of belonging that is conceived, performed, negotiated, discussed, organized, and taught. Discourse does not limit itself to narratively reflecting an already given reality: it is a process that forms objects of knowledge and determines interpersonal configurations. Ethnicity is then better framed as a practice, socially established according to historical situations and personal feelings of belonging. It is a performative act, a *habitus* in the sense of Pierre Bourdieu [Bourdieu 1977]. It is a fact, not a thing.

Finally, beside the top-down scenario of imposed group divisions, a recent proposal by Graeber and Wengrow [Graeber and Wengrow 2021] could provide a groundwork for the sketching of a general model able to account for the way human beings and communities spontaneously create bonds and belongings with their similars, defining bounds and limits for that familiarity.

Schismogenesis is an anthropological term that describes the formation of social divisions and differentiation through progressive interaction between people. From the Greek words σχίσμα (skhisma) and γένεσις (genesis) “generation, creation,” it literally

means “creation of division.” As early as the mid-1930s, anthropologist Gregory Bateson studied some cases of behavioral differentiation among the Iatmul people of the Sepik River, in New Guinea, and introduced this term to account for the outcomes that may follow from contacts between people of different communities [Bateson 1935; Bateson 1936].

The dynamics identified as *schismogenesis* account for both interpersonal patterns, such as the assertive/submissive or the exhibitionism/admiration complementary differentiation, and for wider group relations, such as market competition, international diplomacy, and community rivalries.

Symmetrical, complementary, and reciprocal differentiation of behavioral patterns are further described by the author. Most relevantly here, it is important to highlight that fearing the latently disruptive potential of a conflictual escalation in the case of an exaggerated complementary differentiation, Bateson stressed the importance of existing social institutions able to mitigate the progressive divisions that can potentially lead to open confrontation. Conflict may be reduced by narrowing asymmetries between the groups.

Proposing an expansion of Bateson’s theory, Graeber and Wengrow suggested that the concept of *schismogenesis* could be used to describe the emergence of differences between societies more broadly, as human groups define themselves against their neighbors according to the in-group/out-group distinction. Following their lead and integrating the analysis of Bateson and Barth on the production of ethnic divisions, the concept of *ethnogenesis* may well serve to describe the creation of such social borders, groups, and frontiers under the policies of the otherness organized around ethnic narrative, bridging classical functional approaches, contemporary discourse, and postcolonial studies.

CONCLUSION

We have seen that the concept of ethnicity, defined as the feeling of belonging to a culturally isolated group, linguistically and territorially determined in a rigid and defined manner, neglected to consider all evidence that such stable groups have virtually never existed, as “all nation-states historically involve the amalgamation of many identities” [Appadurai 1996: 156].

All human cohorts, their habits, cultures, and languages are the fruit of a more or less slow process of interaction with others. Identity borders depend on the contrast and engagement with some kind of otherness, together with the power relations involved. With a closer look at the history of the Rwandan Genocide, we have seen how the ethnic identities of Hutu and Tutsi have been socially engineered to serve political agendas under the domination model of the *divide et impera*.

Following Fredrik Barth, we showed that ethnic identity is to be considered as an organizational tool defined by its boundaries, not by its content, and that such metaphorical barriers, just like all others, can shift. We saw under what logic those identity borders may be created and that the presence of frontiers—areas of passage and porosity between identities—does not call into question their existence. Liminality cases

of double membership or cultural crossings do not dissolve ethnic bounds, even when they integrate their performative elements. Finally, we reflected on the practices and forces that create such ethnic groups, a process we defined as *ethnogenesis*, in order to stress its status as a generated, dynamic, cultural product sustained by an ethnic narrative.

We did so in the belief that dismantling essentialism and showing the relative nature of social constructions is a crucial tool to prevent ethnicism and culturalism as disguised modes of racism and, more widely, as means of social discrimination, fuel for conflict in the name of the ethno-states: “The ethnic violence we see in many places is part of a wider transformation that is suggested by the term culturalism. Culturalism [...] is the conscious mobilization of cultural differences in the service of a larger national or transnational politics” [Appadurai 1996 :15].

As seen here with Rwanda, mass media and news agencies often describe civil wars around the world under the hypocritical label of “ethnic conflicts.” Such essentialism, we argue, prevents investigations from searching for the real political and economic reasons behind such conflicts, from social inequality to geopolitical interests, from predatory modes of production to corporate military-industrial complex programs and labor exploitation projects, hungry for disenfranchised prey.

We therefore infer that understanding “ethnic” tensions demands translating them into the forms of social inequality they originate from, disguised under the ethnic discourse.

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Научная статья

ЭТНОГЕНЕЗ И ВОЙНА В РУАНДЕ. ПОЛИТИКА ИНАКОВОСТИ

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Аннотация. Долгое время антропологический анализ основывался на предпосылке, что культурные границы имеют в каком-то смысле линейный характер и основаны на связях между людьми, которые разделяют общую культуру, но при этом имеют уникальные особенности, отличающие их от других групп. Такие границы идентичности могли находить прямое отражение в геополитических границах. Эта точка зрения легла в основу широко распространенного общественного дискурса, транслирующего упрощенные представления о том, как географические границы и социальная изоляция групп являются основными факторами, определяющими культурное разнообразие и сходство между народами. Социальные антропологи, в свою очередь, косвенно поддержали такую точку зрения, приняв весьма расплывчатое определение понятия «общество». Работы Фредрика Барта, наряду с другими важными исследованиями, открыли новую главу в этнографии, ознаменовав отход от антропологических представлений о культурах как об изолированных сущностях и этничности как о первостепенной связи. С тех пор анализ категориальных этнических различий базировался уже не на отсутствии мобильности, контактов или взаимодействия, а на постоянных переговорах между сообществами как ключевом факторе, структурирующем границы идентичности. Африканистика постколониального периода предоставила бесценный материал для изучения социальной онтологии этничности, которая здесь анализируется с особым акцентом на Руанду. Подобные аналитические инструменты, интегрированные в данной работе с постструктуралистской теорией дискурса, по-прежнему имеют решающее значение для предотвращения эссенциализма, расизма, идей этнического и культурного превосходства как средств социальной дискриминации в контексте этногосударств.

Ключевые слова: культурализм, эпистемология, этничность, Фредрик Барт, социальная антропология, Руанда, раса

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