

(Im)possible Belgian Mourning for Rwanda

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Abstract: Rwanda became a Belgian trusteeship under mandate of the Société des Nations after the first World War. With churches playing a prominent role in the political evolution of Rwanda, the two countries were closely bound together. After the 1959 revolution in Rwanda and independence in 1962, development cooperation with strong NGO input still linked them. While the genocide still has tragic influence on the new Rwanda, Belgium has undergone a political process leading to a federal state. The colonial past refers to a national past. Changes in Rwanda and Belgium question any collective attempt of mourning for a past that is very different for all parties involved.

Résumé: Le Rwanda devint une possession de la Belgique sous le mandat de la Société des Nations après la Première Guerre Mondiale. La conséquence du rôle prééminent des églises dans l'évolution politique du Rwanda fut la création de liens étroits entre les deux pays. Après la révolution de 1959 au Rwanda et l'indépendance en 1962, la coopération de développement avec l'impact des ONG ont maintenu ces liens entre les deux pays. Alors que le génocide a aujourd'hui toujours des conséquences sur le Rwanda moderne, la Belgique a, elle, vécu une transformation politique menant à la formation d'un état fédéral. Le passé colonial se mire

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dans le passé national. Les transformations du Rwanda et de la Belgique mettent en question toute tentative collective de faire l'expérience du deuil d'un passé commun, vécu de manière très différente par les deux cultures.

It might seem odd, or even shocking, to attempt to tackle Belgian mourning for Rwanda when Rwandans themselves are trying to cope with the aftermath of a genocide that shook many consciences so deeply and recomposed Rwandan society. Yet the connections between Belgium and Rwanda are still frequently evoked (both by Africans and Westerners, as we shall see) in a context of victimization and in an attempt to erase "the primordial signifier (that) is the murder of the brother by the brother" (Mbembe 2001:26). Mbembe uses this expression in the context of slavery, but it seems appropriate to suggest that recognizing the interactive nature of the process that led to genocide would be a first step, from both the Belgian and the international perspective, toward interaction on a new level, instead of ignoring the circumstances and continuing relationships built on unilateral guilt. It does not seem irrelevant to articulate the process of Belgian mourning for Rwanda within the context of this "founding event." Indeed, this seems the more relevant attitude, as the new Rwandan government built aid interactions on this guilt, while making the genocide a cornerstone of the Rwanda Rushya (new Rwanda). Among the obstacles to dialogue between the antagonists is the quasi-ritual status given to history. To express this in Rwandan terms, it seems that history remains very much what lies at the heart of the drum, a secret known only by the builder and the owner of this emblem of power, a secret that connects the believers to an identity defined under a paradigm of common fidelity to a past kept whole, intangible, and thus, unanalyzed. Vansina (2004) has shown how Rwandan history has been kept in orthodoxy with the official version, while divergent versions more prone to providing historians with factual data on the past were put aside. The Belgian attitude toward its colonial past in Rwanda has long been quite similar, as its representation could not suffer analysis without losing its "absolute," dreamlike efficiency. The motives behind this attitude were impregnated with white narcissism and fostered by the needs of colonial policies. Ideals succeeded one another, but the effects of the policies they sustained were not as much connected with practical realities as with the promotion of a positive image of providers of "the" civilization. After independence, a similar ignorance of local realities and social fractions allowed the agents of development to maintain their comfortable positions.

The Rwandan attitude toward history remains, to a large extent, in tune with its past, and it partakes nowadays in an internationally proliferated acceptance of disinformation that recalls, very much indeed, the

atmosphere prevalent in the early nineties (de Lame 2000; Brauman, Smith, & Vidal 2000; Pottier 2002), albeit in a recomposed social and political configuration. On the Rwandan side, calling on Belgium to answer for the genocide provides an escape from an analysis of the local factors in the organization of the genocide and prevents perception of the current sociopolitical dynamics. It also keeps alive an imaginary link that hinders subjects "facing up to the past" (Oostindie 2001) from walking into the future they want to build for themselves. Indeed, this past is often reduced by Rwandan authors to a straightforward connection between colonial responsibilities and the genocide, while the circumstances that paved the way to genocide are ignored. The two Rwandan republics, the plight of the Rwandan exiles, and the international stakes in Rwanda during the nineties are simply left unaccounted for. I shall argue that the murder of brother by brother that happened in Rwanda could, by its very extent and global resonance, help Rwanda break away from cyclical violence, but only if the internal factors leading to this tragic end are scrutinized. A lucid analysis of the recent past, taking different perspectives into account, could reveal the tragedy to be the impetus for a national reconstruction founded on the recognition of an ultimate brotherhood of the antagonists. Harking back to the Rwandan revolution of 1959, this recognition would, eventually, put an end to the old demands of the Hutu and to the past denial of brotherhood by the dignitaries of the court, as well as opening avenues to shared opportunities.¹ It could also be seen as a watershed event marking a permanent break with colonial attitudes and redefining the bilateral relationships between Belgium and Rwanda, while making it necessary for Rwanda to reassess its history, and for different Belgian (and other international) actors to analyze the actions they promoted in Rwanda and with what results.

I have written elsewhere about the Rwandan possibilities for mourning and reconciliation, trying to take the diverse Rwandan standpoints into consideration, as the aftermath of the genocide has restructured society along new fault lines (de Lame, in press). Dealing with the legacy of colonization remains fundamental to any attempt to determine the future, and without a doubt, the legacy is more daunting to Rwandans than to Belgians. Healing, however, could evolve partly from a sound reconsideration by both countries of their past relationship, and from an assessment of what was at stake for the various actors of the colonial era.

The Rwandan genocide has been a shock beyond any consideration of nationality or affiliation. However, as the media were understandably eager to provide their audience with some simple explanation for the terrible images they dispatched, Belgium and its colonial past came quickly to the fore as the tentative explanations. Quite soon, other immediate responsibilities for the massacres were pointed out, but Belgium, unprepared for this, was forced to discover the unexpected hatred of which she was the object, especially when ten paratroopers were killed under particularly hor-

rible circumstances. Finally, as people who had sought asylum in churches were murdered, there came the painful question of the efficiency of missionary work (still marked by Belgian, and especially Flemish, support) in a small African country considered to be a model of Christian development. The reports of all these events touched individuals, communities, and countries. I shall briefly examine these three levels of the relationship between Belgium and Rwanda, and show how Belgian society responded at each of these levels to the collective challenge of a mourning process. I shall argue that the process of mourning seems unfinished at both the collective and the personal levels, and that until this process is confronted by that which prevents us from seeing ourselves as potential murderers, it may remain impossible to accomplish. As Paul Ricoeur writes about the crimes of the German Third Reich, under such “impossible circumstances” historians must simultaneously “condemn and understand” (Ricoeur 2000:63). As for the participants, they may have to find a way of living together by resorting to what Ricoeur calls “reserve memory,” compartmentalizing the most traumatic memories in order to resume everyday life together. This is not happening in Rwanda (Brauman, Smith & Vidal 2000).

As I agree with Antoine Garapon (2002) and consider what happened in Rwanda as “crimes that we can neither punish nor forgive,” I do not elaborate more here about forgiveness and reconciliation. Before going further, I shall briefly recall what we mean by “mourning.” Freud considers mourning as the “reaction to the loss of a beloved person, or of an abstraction . . . such as freedom, or an ideal . . . The mourning process, or work, ends with the affective disinvestment of the lost object, and a new opening to the world.” Freud continues: “Some people, instead of mourning, sink into melancholy, a morbid condition that differs from mourning by the fact that self esteem disappears in this process.” Freud underlined the narcissistic investment of the object in the case of melancholy, where, in short, there is mainly a loss of oneself (Freud 1940).

When talking about a collective mourning process, we assume that there is a collective feeling, and possibly an identification with a collective cause. The Rwandan collectivity of today, compared to pregenocide society, is quite different in its composition. Moreover, a collective elaboration does not preclude personal memories mingling with these collective feelings and affected by the process. When taking action as a group, people delegate representatives to act on the group’s behalf. For some, this delegation is a substitute for any thinking or action, but for others, it is part of a personal process involved in a collective symbolization. At all levels of the mourning process, cognitive aspects are involved, just as they were in the building of the relationship. Talking about a mourning process rests on an identification of the partners involved in the transformed—or lost—link. As we shall see, over time, both before and after independence, the prominent partners of Rwanda have changed, as well as the relative importance of the various partners.

The shock caused by the genocide resulted in the instant mass production of images of cruelty occulting the causes of the genocide. The simple qualification of the massacres as tribal feuds was typical of the worst racial stereotyping and avoided an analysis of their causes that would have put several aspects of international policies into question. Quite rapidly, the racist connotation of this explanation was defused, as the paternity of these antagonistic tribes was transferred to the former trustee of the country, Belgium. Other immediate responsibilities—those of France, the United Nations, the United States—were soon scrutinized. Belgium was one of the few to place conditions on its assistance, while the unconditional aid provided by these and other countries to the new Rwanda may have given an impression, if not engendered a feeling, of reparation to the well-meaning benefactors.

A Relationship Marred by Misunderstanding

The world discovered Rwanda under these tragic circumstances. This resulted in a massive production of literature that overshadowed works devoted to a deeper analysis of a many-sided crisis in which several partners shared responsibilities. The local consequences of a hasty implementation of international policies remained largely unquestioned, with a few remarkable exceptions. The stigma placed on the Belgian colonial past, as well as the switch to the use of the English language that accompanied the violent Rwandan transition, resulted in the promotion of works, to quote a recent book by Pottier (2002), written “by newcomers for newcomers.” Some of these books serve the academic interests of their authors, who themselves are better served by adopting positions in tune with the official policies and with the criteria of academic aesthetics. One major trend in these works is to promote a one-sided view of the colonial relationship allegedly responsible for the creation of the ethnic hatred that would be the only explanation for the genocide (Mamdani 2001). This position diverts local responsibilities and produces an angelic image of the past that history does not corroborate. It induces a double alienation. In the mirror of Western ethics, the local past seems unacceptable to the subjects of its history. Its evocation produces a rejection of a history seen by its subjects as stamped by the European disdain for their culture. The cause of this alienation is then situated outside of the subject, who is therefore unable to appropriate it in order to regain his own insertion in the course of history. It remains for the victor to write a history that will legitimize its position of power. Some works produced through a complicity of the Rwandan elite with the European power prove to be useful again. Accusing Belgium of the cleavages that became rigid and racist under Belgian rule, however grounded, veils the role of the Tutsi elite, their complicity with the Belgian rulers and their ecclesiastical allies, and their change of mind after the mis-

sionaries had started to promote Hutu elites (see Linden 1977). I shall come back to this later.

While many academics in Belgium and elsewhere are well aware of works that take the population into consideration and restore historical facts (the evaluation of peasant studies by Catharine and David Newbury [2000] and the recent book by Jan Vansina [2004] are but two of many examples), some newcomers take short cuts, adopt the most publicized views, and interpret the Belgian mourning process in terms of an acceptance of losing face. If Belgium gave in to this trend, history would remain “as told by the victors” (to use an expression by Bogumil Jewsiewicki) and space would be left neither for the facts nor for the complexity and diversity of history from which self-evaluation and a change in policy can originate. Both Rwandans and Belgians would be losers in the process. Most persons concerned by the Rwandan genocide have tried to understand. As for the genocide itself, the very first weeks that followed shed light on several other responsible factors that alleviated the guilt and allowed for an opening to facts both past and present.

Indeed, the genocide shook Belgium in a specific way and induced Belgians to rethink their role in Rwanda and in Congo. The killing of the ten Belgian paratroopers on the very day the genocide started, and under gruesome circumstances akin to those of the other killings of the day, made Belgians suddenly discover the hatred felt for them by a people whose love they had taken for granted and from whom they expected gratitude. I shall not detail the military reactions to the murders of the ten soldiers (see Willame 1987), but it seems worth noting that 48 percent of Belgians interviewed thought the Belgian troops should stay in Rwanda and try to stop the killings. Obviously, this is not what happened. The Belgian troops left the country after all Belgians had been evacuated. Many mistakes were made by other parties involved in military operations during what Reyntjens called a period of “panic diplomacy” (Reyntjens & Parqué 2000:241). While many partners were helping the new Rwandan government generously and unconditionally, Belgium never thought, Reyntjens writes, that this new government would bring stability to the country. As early as 1995, Belgium limited itself to humanitarian aid and tried, as she had done since 1990, to make aid conditional upon respect for human rights. The aid was, until last year, directed mainly to the judiciary, health sectors, and small farmers. Compared to assistance provided by other donors, Belgian aid decreased, leaving Belgium less influential but possibly more at ease with its reconsidered past relationship with Rwanda. The genocide—and the killing of the ten Belgian soldiers that publicly assigned a special role to Belgium—shattered the insouciance of the community of expatriates who had refused to reconsider the effects of their contributions (Hanssen 1989:89). The sudden and unexpected expressions of hatred made some Belgians aware of other misunderstandings, such as Rwandan reactions to policies perceived as partisan; the refusal by Belgium, after the attack by

the FPR (1990), to deliver arms ordered and paid for by the Habyarimana government (which Rwandans could perceive as favoring the FPR); or Belgian newspaper commentaries considered meddling and thus in tune with colonial time.

Other aspects of the pregenocide situation, such as the imposition of the multiparty system as the only way to democracy, were reminders of the role Belgium played in the Rwandan revolution, when a multiparty system was first promoted. Before independence was achieved Belgium put Hutu in charge of the state, which caused a Tutsi exodus the next generation has wanted to avenge. These memories, and the shift in policy they recall, have put Belgium in a situation where both Hutu and Tutsi can resent its political role, while keeping Belgium as a special place of reference and appealing for a reassessment of the past. The Belgian public pressured authorities to assign responsibility for the deaths of the ten paratroopers. A first commission examined the circumstances of their deaths in 1996, followed by a special commission the year after. This second commission sparked debate concerning far more than the ten murders. The media gave accounts of the proceedings. This, as well as the many conferences and debates organized by various groups at different levels, provided Belgian society with opportunities to rethink the past at collective levels and to try and come to terms with the new self-image confronting it. A law promulgated in 1993 was adapted in 1999 to include crimes of genocide within its self-declared universal application.² Four Rwandans were judged and declared guilty. In April 2000, the prime minister presented the Rwandan government with apologies, while the new minister of foreign affairs launched a policy of "moral diplomacy" that led him to play a mediating role at the Conference against Racism in Durban (August 31 to September 8, 2000). He termed its intervention as a contribution "to close the darkest chapters of our common history, in order to be able to build a new relationship based on mutual respect, solidarity and partnership." Even if the limited influence of a small country soon became obvious, these actions and proclamations were also meaningful for a Belgian society coping with a damaged self-image. All of these actions facilitated a process of mourning, and, in the collective imagination, possibly severed the colonial ties that cooperation tainted by the past had allowed to continue. In this context, the judiciary assistance provided to Rwanda testifies not only to a willingness to help in sectors perceived to be neutral, but, by constantly appealing to the need to avoid impunity, alludes to the impunity with which the murderers of the time of the revolution had acted. In view of a past colored with self-confidence and paternalism, the policy of Belgian cooperation, which was rather restrained until 2004, might well have betrayed a desire to avoid any political support. But then what would be the sense of resuming more substantial cooperation recently? This should be examined within a broader regional and political context. Mourning might well be expressed only by those who knew Rwanda before the genocide, while the security internally

enforced by the current Kigali regime would seem a sufficient guarantee to newcomers.

What Kind of Peace in Churches?

Even more specific was the shock felt by the clergy and other religious people involved in various kinds of development work in Rwanda. When missionaries had arrived in Rwanda in 1900, and until independence, the colonial administration reflected very much the Belgian society of the time. The Church was still quite powerful and the understaffed administration needed to collaborate with missionaries, as a total of six hundred Westerners were in Rwanda on the eve of independence. Changes in mentality after World War II were reflected in the changed mentality of European missionaries and led toward the Rwandan revolution through what was seen as a move toward democracy. Rwandan actors took the new opportunities these changes had provided them with. When it came to negotiating independence, the Tutsi ruling class called upon the United Nations and the rising Hutu elite seized the opportunities that the Western idea of democracy was offering them. Denying local interests and strategies led missionaries to think they were promoting social democracy in a deeply Christianized country. This view led them to forget that a Church is also a human institution that offers opportunities made even more attractive in a context of scarcity. The signs of conformity and the willingness to comply were mixed with ulterior motives in Rwanda just as it was in our country when parts of the society depended on the Church for their social pursuits. After independence, the Belgian presence grew in Rwanda and cooperation remained important. The churches were perhaps even more visible than before and certainly more widely present across the country. The president was ostentatiously devout, and this contributed to the association of the Church with the state in representations of the country when the crisis came. Connections between Rwandans and Belgians within the charismatic movement were well known. Soon after the genocide had begun, it appeared that churches were no longer respected by the killers as places of refuge and, even worse, that priests and nuns had taken part in the murders. The shock was extremely painful and, for many sincere missionaries, put their whole life's work into question. In this context, the condemnation of the two Rwandan nuns put on trial in Brussels is of symbolic significance and the attitude of some Belgian Catholics seems to be questionable. However, as the two nuns were protected by their superiors, interpretations may vary between an emphasis on individual responsibility and symbolic condemnation of the Church.³ At the level of collective responsibility, the past role of the Church cannot be dissociated from the role of the colonial power, but when the facts of genocide are considered in isolation, the collaboration of Church representatives stained the institution. Therefore, if

the ceremonies and choices of the current Belgian government demonstrate a willingness to deal with the colonial past, institutions like the Church can only partake of this mourning process if they acknowledge their political involvement. Otherwise, their institutional position makes it possible for members to take refuge in a supernatural order for themselves and escape history.⁴

Conclusion

Belgian politics in Rwanda were enshrined in the “pillars” typical of Belgian society: Christian democrat, socialist, and liberal divisions intertwined with community divisions between Flemish and French-speakers, with Flanders being mainly Catholic and Wallonia rather socialist-minded and liberal.⁵ During the colonial era, the language cleavage did not coincide entirely with regional divisions, as the Flemish elite usually spoke French. Flanders, with a Catholic minister almost constantly in charge of foreign relations, was responsible for Rwanda. The genocide resonated in the French-speaking community, which had lost ten paratroopers in Rwanda, and in the Flemish community, which had sent many of its people to bring the comforts of faith and civilization to a faraway and poor, but attractive, country. Its reverberations were different among disparate factions of the Catholic Church, with charismatic conservative movements coming to the defense of Rwandan clergy. Apologies were presented to the Rwandan government by a Flemish, albeit liberal, prime minister. The process that led to a federal Belgian state certainly makes the expression of national regrets appropriate when referring to a vanished past, but also slightly inadequate when it concerns the mourning process of a transformed community. Just as Rwanda faces new cleavages, so does Belgium. The shame that followed the “irresponsible retreat” (Willame 1997) of the Belgian troops from the MINUAR shattered the image Belgium had acquired through the promotion of a bucolic, rural, and Catholic Rwanda. To a large extent, the changes in Belgian policy toward Rwanda demonstrated, for a while, an acceptance of loss.

This, however, only partially fulfills the individual need for a mourning process. At the individual level, the action of many Christians and of some members of the clergy during the genocide, as well as the profanation of the churches, took on personal overtones, as they called personal ideals into question. Those who feel they devoted their life to people discover that some of them, sometimes many of them, were not as faithful as they thought. This is a position partly akin to what Rwandans and those close to them must have felt when they discovered a previously hidden side in their friends and lost some of them because they were killed and still others because they had killed. Torn apart by a refusal to choose sides, and finding in this refusal the strength to face the past, these Rwandans face the

future uncertain about their own choices. In this respect, mourning becomes an exercise in facing life and death without illusion, and this is a lifelong process.

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Notes

1. See Nkundabagenzi (1961:18–42). After the Hutu modern elite had sent his "Manifesto of the Bahutu" to the vice-governor general, the *abagaragu*, the high dignitaries of the Court, replied, in 1958, that no brotherhood could exist between Tutsi and Hutu, as the former had conquered the latter, killed their kings, and subjugated them.
2. This "universality" was significantly restricted after 2003 in an attempt to foster good international relations.
3. Nobody, it seems, questioned the religious calling of the two nuns in a country where convents were an escape from poverty and male domination.
4. About the attitude of the churches, and especially of the Catholic Church, during the colonial era, the genocide, and while facing the accusations against its members, see Saur (2004).
5. For a more thorough account of this problem, see Saur (2004).