

Neither obedient nor resistant: state history as cultural resource in post-genocide Rwanda*

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ABSTRACT

Following the 1994 genocide, scholars have criticised the Rwandan government's official account of national history and its restrictions on competing historical narratives. But what might Rwandans be doing with that state narrative *besides* conforming to it out of fear of reprisal? I argue that to understand what sustains official narratives we must grasp not only their coercive aspects, but also how social actors put them to work for different reasons. I offer four possible forms of agency in which Rwandans engage when they reproduce official history to show how – while forcibly imposed – government narratives are nonetheless cultural resources that people can turn to personal and collective visions, projects and desires. The article aims to develop a more robust understanding of how people respond to imposed narratives of nationhood and history, since it is important to attend not only to resistance, but also conformity to them.

INTRODUCTION

There is an old theme in the classic history and ethnography of Rwanda that characterises the population as unusually 'obedient' (e.g. Maquet 1954, 1961; Louis 1963; Meyer 1984). Based on the colonial notion that Tutsi and Hutu had distinct behavioural traits, obedience grew into an ethnically marked, stereotypical quality disparagingly linked to the Hutu majority (Lemarchand 1970; Eramian 2014, 2015). More

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recently, ‘Rwandan obedience’ found purchase in accounts of the 1994 genocide that rely on a ‘traditional’ mentality that predisposed people to follow orders to kill (e.g. Cart 1995, cited in Uvin 2001: 10) and in accounts emphasising the role of popular hate radio in mobilising the population (e.g. Thompson 2007). While this explanation for the genocide suffers from a view of obedience as a mechanistic, static feature of ‘Rwandan culture’ or a psychological predisposition (Uvin 2001: 84; Lemarchand 2002: 309), today’s Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF)-led government perpetuates these ideas in its vilification of rural people (Thomson 2013). RPF elites blame rural *génocidaires* and their ‘poverty of the mind [*la pauvreté d’esprit*]’ for lacking the wherewithal to stand up to superiors’ orders in 1994. Disparagement of the rural majority is central to the RPF’s story of the birth of the ‘New Rwanda’. Indeed, under the RPF – the force credited with ending the genocide – there is only one acceptable version of the distant and recent past. That story positions the RPF as heroic agents who can both develop Rwanda with a forward-looking vision of modernity and effect a return to an idyllic state of pre-colonial unity.

In response to the RPF’s troublesome appeal to the ‘obedient Rwandan’ stereotype, contemporary scholars have been concerned to show how Rwandans – whether Hutu, Tutsi or Twa – are not passive in the face of authority. Inspired in part by larger trends in the social sciences away from a view of action as adherence to social rules (e.g. Bourdieu 1990), this new wave of scholarship aimed to demonstrate how Rwandans actively resist official directives. In this article, however, I leave aside the important question of why and by whom RPF policy might be contested, resisted, or only begrudgingly followed, because others have so effectively addressed it through analyses of everyday acts of defiance (e.g. Burnet 2012; Thomson 2013; Purdeková 2015). Within analyses of post-genocide Rwanda, what remains poorly understood is how state-sanctioned versions of Rwandan history, ethnicity, and the genocide are invoked by Rwandans whose projects and aspirations are not primarily directed at legitimating RPF rule. My aim in this article is to build understanding of what Rwandans are *doing* when – rather than resisting the RPF line – they reproduce or conform to it. I ask, can Rwandans do things with the state narrative *besides* express support for or opposition to the regime that purveys it in the interests of its own political legitimacy? This article thus supports other scholars’ challenges to ‘Rwandan obedience’, but – perhaps counterintuitively – it does so not through attention to opposition to state policy, but rather people’s adherence to it or (sometimes selective)

reproduction of it. Even narratives imposed through coercion can serve as cultural resources (Swidler 1986) on which social actors can draw in daily interactions and in making sense of the past and future. It is important to understand not only resistance, but also conformity to dominant narratives, because people can adhere to them for different reasons.

Based on long-term ethnographic fieldwork in the Rwandan university town of Butare in 2004, 2008, 2009 and 2014, I argue that if we are to understand the social and political life of state-sanctioned narratives, we must understand not only why they are politically expedient, but also how and why social actors actually use them in practical situations. In pushing beyond the analytical lenses of domination/obedience or domination/resistance, the article raises questions about the implicit assumption that there is something inherently more genuine about opinions or perspectives that oppose dominant narratives, like the RPF one, and that the only reason people reproduce them is because they think they have no choice. Make no mistake: this article is not a defence of RPF history and knowledge production. It is not an effort to bolster that narrative or suggest that it is factual or sympathetic, since there are many reasons to doubt its accuracy and to be concerned about the political work that it is made to do (Pottier 2002; Eltringham 2004; Reyntjens 2015a, 2015b). Similarly, this article is in no way an endorsement of the Rwandan government's approach to silencing political dissent through appeal to unimpeachable 'good things' such as development, unity and reconciliation. Rather, under what conditions do Rwandans put the politically charged state narrative of history, ethnicity and the imperative to reconcile to work, and for what ends? What does it let people do? Crucially, what sustains the state narrative, since imposition and coercion alone are not enough (Gramsci 1971)? In this vein, this article aims to get at some of the intricacies of people's relationships to the historical and political conditions they inherit and inhabit (Steedman 1986: 19).

This article has three sections. First, I describe the fieldwork on which this article is based. Second, I turn to the RPF's official narrative of history. For contemporary Rwanda scholars, this account hardly needs to be repeated, but I do so to situate the analysis, to orient those less familiar with the Rwandan context, and to frame the problem of imposed nationhood following violence. The third section considers four possible forms of agency in which Butare residents are engaged when they invoke official history, even as they understand why it is problematic: responding to RPF coercion and silencing of dissent, seeking confirmation of one's worth in the post-conflict moment, managing

the opacity of what befell their country in 1994, and finally, expressing desire for a more peaceful future. In practice, however, it is never clear which or how many of these (or other) forms of agency inform people's choice to deploy the narrative. Hence, the ethnographic material that animates this analysis should not be read as definitively one 'type' of usage or another. There is no necessary contradiction between fear of deviating from official history and finding it useful. My aim is to develop a more robust understanding of how people respond to and engage with imposed narratives of nationhood and history.

Since this article is structured around four forms of 'agency', it is worth clarifying this nebulous term (Hitlin & Elder 2007). Broadly, in the social sciences, agency and resistance frequently appear together and are understood as responses to power, domination or structural constraint (Giddens 1979), though domination can no doubt be agentive, too. As evidenced by the sheer number of articles that pair the terms 'agency' and 'resistance' in their titles, scholars often conceive of agency *as* resistance and compliance as a *lack* of agency. By resistance, I mean a broad range of acts, from overt aggression against the powerful, to less-visible 'infrapolitics' (Scott 1990), to activities that contest power from both inside and outside a dominant system (de Certeau 1980). However, the agency that I have in mind encompasses, but is not limited to, resistance. In the Rwandan context, to adhere to the state narrative or to be silent entirely (Burnet 2012), to be 'passive' or 'compliant', can be just as agentive as the choice to contest it. By agency, then, I mean something akin to social action (Weber 1978: 22): meaningful, deliberate action that takes account of the past, present or future actions of others, and that includes the (apparent) failure to act. Agency is also usefully conceived as a series of stances (Taylor 1992) people can take to imposed history when they use it as a cultural resource (Swidler 1986) to meet the moral demands of everyday post-genocide life. Indeed, Butare residents' usages of the state narrative tell us about their stances on themselves, others and the post-conflict period, and they uncover the partiality of resistance or obedience frameworks for grasping what people do with this story.

FIELDWORK IN BUTARE

The devastating 1994 genocide that took up to one million Rwandan lives weighs heavily on the present. Over the years, my fieldwork has taken place with a range of Butare residents – both Tutsi and

Hutu – including university professors and students, clergy, taxi drivers, office workers, civil servants, NGO staff, small business owners, librarians, restaurant servers, motel cleaners and the unemployed. As residents of Rwanda’s unofficial ‘intellectual capital’, my research participants spoke either French or English,¹ and some spoke both, because all had at least some high school education. Many had at least some university education. This is a small subset of the Rwandan population to be sure, since competence in European languages sets them apart from the roughly 80% of monolingual Kinyarwanda speakers. Nonetheless, many of my research participants found their social status ambiguous. Low-status workers, such as servers or cleaners, are not necessarily uneducated, and many high school and university graduates find themselves unemployed and forced to return to rural homesteads to cultivate family land. Indeed, just because people adhere to the narrative of power does not mean they are especially powerful themselves (Englund 2006), and the official narrative of the past and future is one property of eliteness that costs nothing to emulate. In any case, my educated research participants are among the most well versed in the state historical narrative, and as I show, their usage of it uncovers an important set of politics around Rwanda’s violent past and what it means to be part of the story of the ‘New Rwanda’.

The usages of the state narrative that I discuss come primarily from Tutsi Butare residents. Still, there were times when Hutu also invoked RPF history, which suggests that at least in some moments, they, too, find something useful in that historical narrative. Nonetheless, ‘amplified silence’ (Burnet 2012: 111) remains significant in the narrative practices of Hutu Rwandans, because RPF history erases much of their experience, especially Hutu victimisation by the RPF in the 1990s. Practices of communication have long been inseparable from power in Rwanda and are characterised by a pronounced dialectic of revealing and concealing. Indeed, communication, speech and silence depend largely on expediency rather than ‘truth’ (Ingelaere 2009: 518–19), which may help to understand why Hutu sometimes invoke a narrative that conflicts with their own historical experience. Thus, while the forms of agency I describe are to some degree ethnically circumscribed, Hutu usage of RPF history demonstrates that there is something more than ethnic heritage that shapes people’s orientation to this story.

Methodologically, what must be emphasised is that I never *asked* research participants about state-produced history. Rather, all instances of people’s mention of it are unsolicited, since as an anthropologist and

ethnographer, I was more interested in the moments that led people to invoke it than I was in trying to elicit it. In addition, and for privacy and ethical reasons, I asked questions that made space for people to talk about the violence if they wanted to, but that also let them sidestep the issue if they preferred. And indeed, my fieldnotes indicate that never a week went by without several people bringing up at least some elements of this official history, whether to support it, contest it or put it to some other use. Unless otherwise specified, my findings are grounded in participant observation and everyday talk by Butare residents in both public and private settings, including workplaces, neighbourhood bars (*cabarets*), on the street, in people's homes, at *gacaca* tribunals for genocide crimes, and genocide commemorations. Where specifically noted, findings come from formal, semi-structured interviews, of which I completed 20 during my fieldwork.

HISTORY, ETHNICITY, AND THE 1994 GENOCIDE ACCORDING TO
THE GOVERNMENT OF RWANDA

The legitimating power of historical myths is perhaps nowhere more evident than in post-genocide Rwanda, because of the political work that invented continuity with an idealised, pre-colonial past is made to do (Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983). Rwanda is not like other 'post-conflict' societies, where ethnic, religious or national difference is legislated in power-sharing agreements and coalition governments (e.g. Northern Ireland, Bosnia and Herzegovina). Rather, drawing on a mythic version of history, RPF governance aims to erase ethnic difference in its project of imposing unified nationhood and a singular Rwandan identity. After the RPF took power in July 1994, one of its first acts was to rewrite the history books (Jefremovas 1997: 91). While this might seem a curious priority in light of the pressing post-genocide needs of the population, Reyntjens (2015b: 2) argues that knowledge production in the RPF's Rwanda is a sovereignty issue as much as are control over its borders and domestic policy. A central objective of the critical scholarship on post-genocide Rwanda has been to debunk the national history promoted by the RPF. This literature aims to show why RPF-sanctioned history is a politically convenient narrative aimed at securing legitimacy and popular compliance. It seeks to uncover the 'dark side' of RPF rule in contravention to the credibility it enjoys for ending the genocide. Scholars have worked to expose the RPF's repressive policy of using 'divisionism' to justify persecuting and intimidating

its political opponents and denouncing those who promote alternative interpretations of Rwandan history (Pottier 2002). A pillar of the RPF's anti-colonial, development-oriented vision for the New Rwanda is to challenge foreign researchers' right to represent the country and its past. Indeed, the RPF dismisses critical analyses of its historical narrative as the products of at best uninformed, and at worst encroaching neo-colonial outsiders who claim to know Rwanda, in some cases having never set foot in the country (Fisher 2015: 141–2).

According to RPF history, pre-colonial Rwanda was a unified and harmonious society characterised by cooperative, peaceful relations. As the story goes, the Belgian colonial administration and the Catholic Church disrupted this idyllic state in the early 1900s, when they imposed Tutsi, Hutu and Twa ethnic distinctions and racialised them into rigid categories based on patrilineal descent. This functionalist narrative explains that what we now call ethnicity in Rwanda had little social salience and denoted merely innocuous, occupational distinctions between Tutsi cattle herders, Hutu cultivators and Twa potters, and that because of exogamous marriage between them, they lacked hard social boundaries (Semujanga 2005: 71–2). Clans that cut across Tutsi, Hutu and Twa are said to have been much more important than ethnic boundaries in pre-colonial times (Freedman *et al.* 2011: 301). The institution of *ubuhake* cattle clientship is also cited as evidence for pre-colonial soft boundaries between occupational categories. The story invokes the seductively simple (and historically questionable) '10 cow rule', by which owning more than 10 cows was the criterion for being labelled Tutsi, while fewer than 10 cows resulted in a Hutu label (Pottier 2002: 110, 117–19). Furthermore, Tutsi patrons are said to have offered support and protection to their Hutu clients through *ubuhake*, and so relations between these occupational categories are characterised as symbiotic rather than exploitative. Ultimately, RPF-sanctioned history explains that ethnicity was a colonial strategy of dividing Rwandans in order to better rule over them (Reyntjens 2015a: 28). The genocide is thus blamed on previous post-colonial regimes for exploiting, not mending ethnic schisms and the 'obedient' population ready to follow any orders, including those to kill. Hence, the RPF's approach to legitimating its rule relies on careful cultivation of its moral authority as the only agents capable of remaking Rwanda in an image of unity and development. The moratorium on labelling ethnicity on national identity cards and the restrictions on how ethnic labels can be used in public (only to denounce them or, paradoxically, to refer to the 'Genocide

of the Tutsi') are central components of the RPF's claims to promote a singular, overarching Rwandan identity.

Rwandans of all walks of life are instructed in this historical narrative. The RPF has a clear stake in it, because if they can ensure people adhere to it, this *itself* can be cited as evidence of the veracity of the narrative: the RPF has successfully taught Rwandans the 'truth' about their past, they have seen that the divisions between them were colonial forms of manipulation, and they have united in the cause of reconciliation. Official history is disseminated in schools, in peace-building workshops and *sensibilisation* (awareness-raising) meetings, in radio broadcasts, at genocide commemorations, and in the controversial *ingando* civic re-education camps that are compulsory for certain categories of people, including released prisoners convicted of genocide crimes, ex-combatants, students, politicians, church leaders, women's association members and returned refugees (Mgbako 2005: 209). But even as official history is widely taught and by no means purely expert knowledge, some of the clearest expressions of it come from Rwandan scholars themselves. Local scholars are constrained from producing or teaching historical knowledge that contradicts the RPF version, lest they find themselves accused of the crimes of divisionism or 'genocide ideology' (Human Rights Watch 2008). This extract from a local scholar's publication is my translation from the original French.

Up until the beginning of the last century, in the popular Rwandan imaginary, 'the country of a thousand hills' evoked a country where milk and honey flowed, a country where values like friendship, fraternity, solidarity, love, bravery and patriotism constituted the foundations of education and the cement of social relations between all Rwandans. These Rwandans were proud to share the same history, to commune through the same culture, and to share the same language ... The history of Rwanda, like that of the Great Lakes region, was reconstituted through a vision characterized by racist ideology and by diffusionist theory developed near the end of the nineteenth and start of the twentieth century, respectively. Reconstituted in a vision marked by racism and the will to divide and conquer, the ancient history of Rwanda was reduced to migrations of the three components of Rwandan society: the Batwa, the Bahutu, the Batutsi. To these three groups, baptized Pygmoids, Bantu, and Hamite, were attributed different origins and racial identities. Moreover, colonial political policy, served by ethnologists and by missionaries, excelled at classifying, differentiating, and ranking them. (Kanimba 2005: 129–30)

Euro-American scholars tend to agree that this story suffers from factual problems. It conflicts with accounts by Lemarchand (1970), Newbury (1988), Pottier (2002) and Vansina (2004), among others, who

demonstrate that ethnic distinctions were present and mattered a great deal in pre-colonial times, notably with respect to political inclusion and exclusion and in the restriction of the most hated, humiliating forms of compulsory labour (the *uburetwa* corvée) to Hutu men. In these competing understandings of the Rwandan past, deep status divisions between Twa, Hutu and Tutsi pre-dated colonial rule. Scholars cite the centralisation campaign by the Tutsi *mwami* Rwabugiri between 1860 and 1895, which extended the rule of the *mwami* from today's southern/central Rwanda to northern regions that were long governed by Hutu rulers (Lemarchand 1970: 58; Linden 1977: 19). Still, debate persists over these competing histories, because of the general problem of reliable historical sources in Rwanda. Written largely at the moment of independence and the struggle between Tutsi- and Hutu-led parties over who should govern the post-colonial state, historical sources themselves have long been weapons in 'an intense propaganda war' (Vansina 1998: 38). Since these historical sources are explicitly ideological and therefore easily contested, it is hard to establish definitive facts about the pre-colonial past.

Even as the RPF's interpretation of the past is contested by scholars, the question remains, does the fact that it is imposed mean that people's usages of it are simply robotic reproductions to stay out of political hot water? What might they be doing *besides* ensuring they are not accused of spreading divisionist rhetoric? Does constraint mean they cannot turn historical 'knowledge' to their own purposes? In what follows, I discuss four possible forms of agency in which Butare residents engage when they invoke state history: first, a fearful response to a coercive state; second, the search for status in the post-genocide moment; third, a way of managing the uncertainty and excess surrounding how the genocide was possible; and finally, an expression of a wish for a better future.

WHAT CAN PEOPLE DO WITH AN IMPOSED NARRATIVE?

Responses to fear and coercion

As I noted above, coercion is by far the most well-explored reason why Rwandans might adhere to state narratives of the past. Indeed, it can be hard to tell where private memory and public history begin and end, and interviewers in Rwanda know well the experience of asking people about personal or collective memory and receiving official civic education in response. Formal interviews are precisely a situation in which the expedient choice is to stick to the official story. But again,

this is not merely passive reproduction of the state narrative, because the situations in which people choose or reject that narrative are patterned, and they actively select which elements of the story to highlight and to downplay depending on the social context. In other words, in certain moments and not in others, people choose to reproduce official history, and sometimes, fear of deviating from it seems to be a driving reason for this choice.

A typical example of an interview producing adherence to state history came in March 2008, when a university student I call Faustin agreed to sit down with me to talk about the survivors' association of which he was a member at the time. We met on the university campus in the late afternoon, when darkness starts to fall in equatorial Rwanda. As soon as we began, it was clear that Faustin was uncomfortable. He shifted awkwardly in one of the straight-backed wooden chairs we had dragged onto the lawn (although these chairs were so painful to sit in, they would cause anyone to shift) and he peered distractedly into our dusky surroundings to see if anyone was watching or listening. When I asked him about the main challenges facing his association, he explained:

F: We have many problems, it goes without saying. We have members without parents who have nowhere to go. They have nowhere to live, nothing to eat. But we have learned a great deal from the National Unity and Reconciliation Commission. The NURC has helped. They teach us about national unity, unity before the colonial period, and our national Rwandan identity. Because of reconciliation, there aren't many problems today. There aren't many conflicts, and certainly not about the genocide. Reconciliation helps us to study together, learn together. We see how the genocide ideology was based on false premises. Reconciliation helps people to understand what happened during the genocide, it helps us to work through our problems together.

LE: Are there any problems between your association and the NURC?

F: No, nothing negative. (Butare March 2008)

Faustin took my question about contemporary challenges for genocide survivors and responded to it by drawing on key elements of the official account of pre-colonial unity, genocide ideology as based on false understandings of ethnicity, and RPF-backed reconciliation as the solution to it all. He refused any suggestion that there was anything problematic about the NURC as far as its relationship to his survivors' organisation, although I have certainly heard other survivors complain of incompatible interests between their advocacy groups and the agencies charged with effecting unity and reconciliation. The interview with Faustin was probably the most uncomfortable one I have conducted in

all my time in Rwanda. His unease surprised me at the time given his initial enthusiasm to participate. But with the benefit of hindsight (and much more field experience), my sense is that he was caught off guard by how the social situation of the interview produces particular kinds of pressures to make quick decisions about what to reveal and conceal. Given the political context, there is always the worry that an interviewer is a government agent sent to check up on members of the population and the stories they are telling. The interview with Faustin was mercifully interrupted by a torrential downpour that sent us fleeing for the sheet metal awning of a nearby building. The sound of the rain on the sheet metal was so deafening, it was not possible to continue. Since Faustin was by no means the only person to whom I could speak at his survivors' association, and given his discomfort with the interview process and his unresponsiveness when I sent him a text message a couple of days later, I did not ask him to meet with me again to complete my schedule of questions.

Reproduction of the state historical narrative is not limited to Rwandan intellectuals' scholarship or formal interview settings. Butare residents worry that a wide range of statements and actions can be read as contesting that narrative of disrupted pre-colonial unity and its post-genocide recovery by the RPF, and so adherence to state history is not just a matter of repeating its facts verbally. It can also take the form of celebrating it on the occasions that demand it. 4 July is Liberation Day in Rwanda, the date that commemorates the RPF's taking control of Kigali and putting an end to the genocide. On Liberation Day, the RPF publicly promotes its moral authority as a national unifier, a valiant force that both ended the violence and works to restore a romanticised, pre-colonial unity. On 4 July 2014, I was with Odette, a Tutsi genocide survivor and well-known small business owner in Butare. She and I were sharing a drink in a local restaurant, where the songs and speeches of Liberation Day were blaring from a makeshift sound system. Odette was listening in on a neighbouring table of women, and from their conversation she gathered that they were wives of military men. At one point, they left their seats and began to dance enthusiastically to the Liberation Day songs. The lyrics of these songs are ideological, patriotic tributes to the RPF, and reproduce the RPF story of the genocide as precipitated by colonial divisiveness, which was later exploited in acts of 'bad governance'. They also, of course, praise the RPF for its unity-building initiatives and its vision for the New Rwanda. Seeing the women's 'RPF worship', Odette got up and energetically joined them as they laughed and danced around their table in a circle.

Later, as we walked back to her house, Odette told me that she had no desire to dance; after all, Liberation Day is an artificial marker of the end of the genocide, and violence continued for months after. Rather, she explained that she could not be seen sitting ‘indifferently’, since doing so could be read as opposition to the heroic story of the RPF and its campaign to ‘restore’ pre-colonial unity to Rwanda. If she is suspected of opposition to the government, she worries that she will be questioned about her political views, her business could be deliberately undermined, and her very safety and security threatened. Indeed, one of Odette’s most frequent topics of conversation when in the privacy of her living room was how the local authorities keep watch on her. She explained that genocide survivors are in a bad position, especially educated ones, because they are seen as a threat to the state. In a classic invocation of stereotypical ‘Hutu’ obedience and ‘Tutsi’ shrewdness, Odette explained that the government does not fear convicted and released Hutu génocidaires, because, as she put it ‘they were mobilised once before, and they’ll follow orders again if they’re told to’. It is the (Tutsi) survivors they fear, she explained, because many are known to harbour resentments toward the RPF for the pressure they place on them to forgive and reconcile with the perpetrators (see also Buckley-Zistel 2006: 111). ‘They keep an eye on me because I am the widow of someone who was influential, and now they think I could be involved in subversive circles’, Odette explained. I was with her one day when she received four phone calls in two hours from an old acquaintance turned local official. She became agitated when he said he wanted to pay her a visit, and he peppered her with questions about the whereabouts of other survivors and what they are doing. While even Odette admits that she is never sure if her fears are founded or if they are the product of a ‘highly advanced trauma’ as she sometimes joked, her reasoning for joining the Liberation Day festivities was rooted in a fear of being seen to oppose RPF political projects. Paradoxically, then, the act of rising and dancing was a way of quietly keeping her head down.

Seeking self worth and status

As the preceding discussion and many other scholars show, state coercion is a force in Rwanda. But the question is: does a repressive state tell the whole story about how Butare residents deploy state narratives? People can be just as self-regulating as they are constrained when it comes to official narratives (Englund 2006: 83), and they may well see

something expedient in them. Crucially, the RPF history is the narrative of power in post-genocide Rwanda. It underpins all of the RPF's controversial initiatives to effect the New Rwanda, from the *gacaca* courts, to the *umudugudu* forced villagisation plan (Newbury 2011), to the *ingando* re-education camps (Purdeková 2015), to the exhortation of the population to seek entrepreneurial ventures. To become influential or financially successful in post-genocide Rwanda – regardless of one's profession – requires being able to hook one's vocation into the story of putting ethnic violence in the past and the birth of the New Rwanda. Aptitude in the state narrative (in the sense of not only knowing the right facts, but also skilful and convincing oratory) is thus a form of distinction and cultural capital. Consequently, many people, especially youth who have been socialised into the RPF historical narrative all their lives, do not require a great deal of coercion to reproduce it. A typical example comes from Éric, a university student in Butare whom I interviewed in 2014 as part of a research project on everyday practices of post-conflict peace building. A child of Tutsi refugees in Uganda, he had fashioned himself as a reconciliation leader and spokesperson for the national unity campaign. For him, promoting RPF history was a way of setting himself apart as a modern citizen with liberal attitudes to ethnicity. For the aspiring upwardly mobile – and Éric, who aimed for a career in economic development, certainly fits this description – aptitude in official history is a path to influence and status in post-genocide Rwanda. I asked him why he joined a student reconciliation club and took on an executive position.²

E: I think the reason why is I value the future development of this country. And this country, historically, and looking at where we came from, we can't make any other strides ahead without reconciliation in this country. We cannot have development when people are not reconciled, when people are not united. ... So I have that zeal for working in issues related to reconciliation

LE: So tell me more about how you teach reconciliation to people.

E: You see, the best tool to teach people, in Rwanda specifically, you have to tell them the history of this nation. You see? You have to show them that at one time, the people of Rwanda were one. You have to show them the history of our nation. You show them that, at some time long ago, we were one people. Same beliefs, having the same culture, having the same understanding. Everything. ... You see? And once they know the true history, you don't even have to try to convince them; they can draw the right conclusions themselves. So history is the main tool that is being used to teach reconciliation, showing people Rwanda before the genocide. So I'm showing them where we want to be. So if anyone

feels they want a bright future for the nation, we cannot have a bright future when people are divided. (Butare June 2014)

I want to emphasise that those who reproduce RPF ideology in a quest for status are not merely calculating, self-interested, actors looking to cash in on a narrative of power. I have no reason to think that Éric was being disingenuous when he extolled the virtues of unity and reconciliation or that he was merely coerced or duped. Rather, he saw something in that narrative that lets him feel that he has an important role in the future of his country. To claim to *choose* and value the official narrative – even as there is no other publicly available alternative – is a way of asserting one's autonomy in a context in which there is little. In this way, it expresses a 'politics of envy' (Steedman 1986: 7) and a desire for status and worth not yet confirmed. Butare residents' everyday talk exposes deep concerns about their self worth – a problem not unique to the post-genocide moment, but one characteristic of many post-colonial societies in which a tiny, educated elite has long distinguished itself from the 'undifferentiated masses'. These anxieties are typically expressed in the desire to 'become someone' of importance, someone with influence and a good reputation. The meaning of status in the post-genocide moment has particular contours, and it is linked not only to measures like wealth, occupation, education, or political clout, but also to development narratives, colonial events and the cultivation of a liberal self who is above getting embroiled in ethnic schisms. So central are these ideals to 'becoming someone' in post-genocide Rwanda that to disavow them might reflect much worse on the 'non-believer' than on the beliefs themselves (cf. Galtung 1990: 298). Éric's promotion of RPF history is a way of seeking confirmation of his worth and a quest to be someone who matters in the post-genocide moment. Éric and others like him want to feel part of a national narrative and to have a life linked to a larger, important story, even if that story is someone else's (Steedman 1986: 77).

I witnessed a similar usage of RPF history in a conversation between Bertrand, a Hutu university professor and two of his colleagues at a neighbourhood bar they favoured for its superior goat *brochettes*. After joking about whether it is more 'civilised' to drink beer from a bottle or a glass, talk turned to education as an antidote to the 'problems' Rwanda has experienced in the past. While the tone remained light-hearted, each of them tried to outdo the others by explaining how his own field of study is most important to Rwanda's future. In so doing, they invoked central elements of RPF history – much like Éric did – to

establish that they are important people in the context of the RPF's development narratives and calls to the population to become new kinds of subjects. The agronomist at the table talked about how knowledge of crop production and land management can help Rwandans return to the idealised, integrated, cooperative social relations that the RPF promotes in its official history. Meanwhile, a linguist argued that regional language integration can make for more cosmopolitan subjects who will see through divisive political tactics. While this conversation was surely shaped by squabbles at the university over disciplinary relevance and budget allocations, these professors were also putting the RPF narrative to work as a justification for the importance of their fields – and therefore their own worth – in the post-conflict moment.

Managing disorder and excess

Narratives are ways of making sense of the things that happen in the world (DuBois 2014: 359), yet they also expose that which they are inadequate to pacify. The genocide comes up routinely in conversation (perhaps especially in the presence of a researcher known to have an interest in it), and Rwandans old enough to remember the violence characterise it as a time that defied reason, retrospective analyses that posit the careful orchestration of the massacres notwithstanding (e.g. Straus 2006).

This sense of incoherence and disorder of 1994 plays out in how people talk about the past and why things turned out the way they did. For example, survivors wonder why they are still alive when the rest of their family was killed. There is no logic or reason to it, and yet they seek a satisfying explanation each time they wonder, aloud or silently, '*pourquoi moi?*' [why me?] or 'how is it possible that the night the génocidaires attacked was the one night I was at my aunt's house?' Similarly, on an evening in June 2014, I was passing through the commercial district of Kigali's Remera neighbourhood with Simbi, an ex-RPF soldier and chronically unemployed university graduate. He pointed to a set of buildings, including a small grocery store that coincidentally was the first store I ever set foot in when I arrived in Kigali for the first time in 2004. 'You see these *étages* [multi-story buildings]? This was the only building left standing in this whole area after the genocide. No one knows why it wasn't destroyed. There is a lot that remains mysterious to us all these years later.'

At a party to honour a Butare priest in May 2014, the festive atmosphere briefly gave way to a lament by Jean-Pierre, a young clergyman. He and two colleagues were inquiring about my research, and I was explaining my ongoing interest in personhood in post-genocide social life. When I paused, Jean-Pierre squinted, gazed searchingly up toward the ceiling and asked – rhetorically, I am sure, ‘How is it possible that people accepted the orders to kill? How is it possible for people who share a language and culture and religion to become so divided? How? *Ça nous dépasse* [it is beyond us].’ He leaned forward, rubbed his face with his hands, and fell silent as he confronted his own inability to grasp and explain the violence. In this moment, Jean-Pierre encountered the limit-experience of the 1994 genocide – the irresolvable tension between the radical alterity of the genocide and its unfolding in the realm of the human (Kurasawa 2009: 95), between its seeming impossibility and the experience of its all-too-real happening.

When Jean-Pierre invoked the idea that Rwandans are united by language, culture and religion, he adhered to key elements of RPF history. But in spite of all of the popular and scholarly explanations for the violence, from the role of colonialism, to the galvanising role of hate radio, to elite power struggles versus popular discontent, there is no explanation or combination of explanations that lets Butare residents feel that the question of how the violence happened is settled. I often heard them fail in their own efforts to explain the genocide by pointing precisely to the excess just as Jean-Pierre did when he rhetorically asked how the genocide was possible – the ‘something more’ that cannot be contained by analysis. There is palpable distress in people’s efforts to reckon with, to account for, and to make accountable (Nelson 2009) those forces and agents responsible for what befell Rwanda in 1994. And this is not only the case for Tutsi survivors. At the local level genocide courts, the gacaca tribunals, Hutu accused of genocide crimes often struggled to explain why they joined in the massacres (see also Hatzfeld 2005). A typical example took place at a trial I attended in 2008. When asked why he accepted orders to kill at the roadblock at the entrance to the university campus, the accused, a man who appeared to be in his fifties, responded, ‘I don’t know’. The judges ridiculed him and told him to tell the truth. When he tried again to satisfy them, he invoked elements of RPF history, especially the idea that he had been taught to hate Tutsi by his leaders, which adheres to the RPF’s blaming of previous governments’ manipulation of ethnicity. And while the accused at gacaca may well have reasons to conceal their motives for participating in the genocide, I often heard both Tutsi and Hutu town residents say that

gacaca placed too much burden on ordinary people to explain why they did what they did. 'They simply did what their fathers and grandfathers were rewarded for doing for decades', as Simbi once put it. 'How can they be expected to answer for all of that?' While in part sympathetic, his words might also be read as disparaging 'thoughtless', 'obedient' rural people who cannot explain their reasons just as the RPF narrative suggests. The point remains, though, that for accused génocidaires, too, there is 'something more' that no accounting for oneself can quite capture, and official history can be invoked as a resource, a response, when no other one can be conjured.

Even though I never directly asked people to explain the genocide, my questions about everyday post-genocide life inevitably evoked the history of violence, and just as it was with Jean-Pierre at the party, I watched other Butare residents struggle to offer me accounts that they found satisfying. Young people's reliance on state history might also be compounded by what three young female university students explained to me when I was visiting them in their dormitory room in May 2008. As we chatted about campus life, they talked with me and among themselves about how their parents tell them very little about the 1990s, because they think it is better for the younger generation not to know too much. As one of the young women, Alice, explained, it is hard to cohabit with you know that your roommate's parents are the ones responsible for sending your own (presumably Hutu) parents to prison for genocide crimes. Meanwhile, she said it is hard for Tutsi whose family members were killed by their roommates' family members, but she then went on to praise RPF unity building to help students live together. Hence, youth in particular often rely on the state narrative not only because it is politically expedient, but also because it is virtually the only one they know. Still, accounting for that which cannot be explained may overlap with other forms of agency. Alice's expression of sympathy for both Tutsi and Hutu youth (rather than ethnic partisanship) is also a characteristic way I heard people make claims to their personal worth and liberal, reconciliatory outlooks, just as Éric and Bertrand and his colleagues did above.

In all of these instances – at the party, at gacaca and in Alice's dormitory room – when words and reason failed, people found themselves relying on the state narrative because it was the one that was available in their repertoire. This is not to say that people do not have or hear recollections of the past that contradict RPF-sanctioned knowledge – indeed, I have heard many people oppose it. Yet the limit-experience of the genocide still suggests that coercion does not suffice to explain

what people are doing when they appeal to RPF history. Even though a coercive state produced the context in which there is only one publicly available historical narrative, there can still be something useful about it. And this is particularly the case when dealing with excesses that Rwandans genuinely do not know how to account for. How do people conceive of the inconceivable (Povinelli 2001: 320)? And might there be a virtue in not knowing alternative stories of the past, as Alice suggested (cf. Rieff 2011)? Nonetheless, this narrative has a double-edge when it comes to dealing with uncertainty around how and why the genocide unfolded as it did: the appeal is in its simplicity and its laying blame largely at the feet of the coloniser for setting in motion the conditions of possibility for the genocide. But its simplicity is precisely what leaves Rwandans wanting for a more satisfying explanation, one that can make order out of the experience of violence's disorder. Even as repeating it might help to tame the excess in some small way, doing so might also redouble that same inexplicability (Felman & Laub 1992) by once again failing to satisfy. In this way, a critical potential emerges in people's conformity to state history, since rhetorical appeals to reason, like Jean-Pierre's, also point to the inadequacy of the available narrative.

Narrating RPF history into existence

Cutting across these interpretations I have offered is another possibility: in spite of all of its problems, sometimes Butare residents say things that suggest that they *want* the state narrative to be true. Indeed, if it were true that ethnicity and the violence committed through its manipulation were the product of a colonial divide and rule strategy, then people wonder if they can *enact* a more peaceful future by repeating the narrative and by insisting that ethnicity does not exist. As much as scholars are justified in their concern about how the Rwandan government uses its historical narrative to produce popular compliance, many Butare residents are drawn to the idea that they can participate in effecting the peaceful, unified, 'post-ethnic' future celebrated in the state narrative. Counter-intuitively, there is something *enabling* about adhering to a historical narrative deployed by state actors to elicit popular compliance. People spoke often of 'doing their part' for a better future, by which they meant learning and spreading the RPF story of a lost pre-colonial unity that must be recovered in the post-genocide period. Indeed, Éric certainly thought he could help to speak RPF history into existence by teaching it to the population. Likewise, Simbi, a strident advocate of

the RPF story of ethnicity as an illusory colonial invention (though he was also a fierce critic of RPF disdain for the rural majority), regularly insisted that people must not get mired in the ‘negativity’ of the past and that people have a responsibility to cultivate a positive, sympathetic orientation to others to bring about more stable futures. It would be easy to conclude that people like Simbi and Éric are duped by a politically convenient historical fiction. It would also be easy to reduce the RPF’s directives to eradicate ‘ethnic thinking’ to yet another instance of thought policing. And while that latter interpretation has weight, it does not exclude the possibility that there is something tremendously appealing to people like Simbi and Éric about ordinary people, not just political leaders, holding sway over their country’s future. While no one in Butare explicitly described their invocation of RPF history as a way of trying to make it true, the ethnographer’s task is always a second order interpretation (Geertz 1973), one shaped by the fieldworker’s depth of experience in that cultural world (Burnet 2012: 35). Since people described spreading the RPF narrative as ‘doing their part’ to prevent future violence, I suggest that repeating this story is a mode of ‘doing things with words’ (Austin 1962), a speech act that – if felicitous – will ward off future violence. In this way, the act of adhering to RPF history is also a critical commentary on how state leaders alone cannot be trusted to forge stability and peace.

The linkage to the quest for self worth is also clear here, since claiming the power to effect the narrative of colonial division → genocide → unity and reconciliation is not only a matter of securing a future free of violence. It is also a way in which people refashion themselves as modern subjects whose autonomous choices can transform their lot in life. Indeed, by narrating the RPF’s story of Rwanda, they aim to narrate not only a more peaceful future but also their ideal selves into existence (Frye 2012: 1567). Even if RPF history and future-making rhetoric suffer from factual errors or disparage the rural majority, in them Butare residents can also enact their desires for a measure of influence over a terribly uncertain future. Indeed, their anxieties about what made the violence possible are also anxieties about whether it can happen again. And in the wake of 1994, to imagine that they are at the mercy of their leaders’ decisions is more than many people can abide. As Thomas, a student and genocide survivor, put it during an interview, ‘I’m just not sure about the future. I don’t know what is going to happen. I pray for a good future, and maybe that will happen, but we just don’t know. But I know I have to do my part, and so that is what I try to do every day.’ But then he paused and added ominously:

You know, they [Hutu] continue to kill those who tell the truth. And after that, they'll finish by revolting against the state. And if they revolt again – because I can't continue watching my own [Tutsi] continue to die like that – me, if I have a heart at all [trails off]. I want things to go well in the future, but I simply won't stand by and watch my own die again. (Butare, June 2008)

Thus, the desire to foster more peaceful futures always runs up against the possibility that violence may erupt again. Alongside his claims to do his part for a better future, Thomas cannot help but imagine what he might do in response to renewed attacks against 'his own'.

CONCLUSION

This article has asked what Rwandans might be doing with state-sanctioned history besides resisting it or reproducing it out of obedience to a government that monopolises knowledge production about the past. Ironically, RPF history disparages blind obedience to authority as a cause of the genocide while demanding the very same thing from the population. And while Rwandans ruefully joke that RPF surveillance is like the tagline of the local mobile phone network, MTN, 'Everywhere You Go', it does not follow that all engagements with official history are oriented toward supporting or resisting it. Imposed nationhood can paradoxically produce its own particular agentive forms. The necessity of appearing to conform to an authoritarian state lets people like Éric use state history to 'become someone', but in a way that may temper the gossip and criticism typically levelled at aspiring elites, since everyone is subject to RPF coercion. Likewise, even as conformity can be interpreted to mean that Rwandans believe, accept, or endorse the simple explanation for the past and bright future promised in the RPF narrative, their usage of that story and their desire for it to be true also suggest that they do not trust that their leaders can bring it about. The danger remains, though, that when Rwandans use RPF history to try to account for the past or to enact a better future, it can lead researchers to misrecognise what they are doing, and with that, their anguish over satisfyingly explaining the genocide or anxieties about what the future holds.

For each of the four forms of agency I have discussed – which in no way need exhaust the possibilities for what Rwandans do with state-sanctioned history – what remains for a researcher is an interpretive uncertainty. In practice, an ethnographer can never be certain whether a social actor adheres to a state-sanctioned narrative out of fear, in an effort to be someone of worth, in an effort to manage an excess, or to try to effect

it in reality. To be sure, Rwandans may be doing more than one thing at once with this story, and their motives are often difficult to pin down, especially when local forms of communication are characterised by a strong tendency toward concealment (Ingelaere 2009: 518). Interpretive uncertainty, however, is not an analytical shortcoming. Rather, this uncertainty lays bare the partiality of a focus on domination/obedience or domination/resistance dynamics between political leaders and populace, even in an authoritarian political context.

The story of historical knowledge production and reproduction in post-genocide Rwanda shows how people can re-signify even imposed narratives to turn them to their own projects, visions, and desires, all the while maintaining a critical understanding of those narratives' politics. In grasping people's relationships to imposed narratives, it is perhaps less important whether they genuinely or consistently believe the stories they choose to tell, regardless of where those stories come from. What matters is what those stories let them do in both settled and unsettled times (Swidler 1986), and especially in times like Rwanda's post-genocide moment, where the existential burdens of living in the wake of violence make it hard to tell the difference between the settled and the unsettled. In such moments, people look for cultural resources to meet the practical and moral demands of their daily lives. While forcibly imposed, the RPF narrative is nonetheless one of those cultural resources, because different actors can put it to different uses. Even though the RPF's tight controls do help to account for that narrative's traction, its uses for non-state actors are nonetheless crucial to understanding what sustains it.

NOTES

1. Almost all of my fieldwork was conducted in French. Until recently, Rwandan English speakers usually acquired the language growing up as children of Rwandan refugees in Uganda or Tanzania. However, since the 2008 legislative change to English as the national language of instruction after the first three years of Kinyarwanda instruction, youth are growing increasingly adept in English.
2. The interview with Éric was conducted in English.

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