

Case Study: Rwanda: Putting people in categories

Odette sat straight, perched forward on a white plastic lawn chair with her hands folded on the bare white plastic table between us. Her husband was playing tennis. Some of her children were paddling around in the pool.

[Odette tells the story of her life as a Tutsi in Rwanda, counting off the years by instances of prejudice and discrimination. Years before the genocide in 1994, hatred and mistrust between the two main tribes in Rwanda, the Hutus who were in power and the minority Tutsis, had been brewing. In the sixties, two of her uncles were taken away and killed. The family thought of escaping, but there were too many of them, including aunts, cousins and grandparents, and they didn't want to leave anyone behind. Odette continues her story.]



Freddy Mutanguha, a survivor of the Rwandan genocide © Aegis Trust

"It was 'seventy three,'" Odette said. "I had left home for a teachers' college [in the southwest] "and one morning, while we were eating before going to mass, they closed the windows and the gates. Then some boys from another [college] came into the dining hall and circled the tables. I was trembling. I remember I had a piece of bread in my mouth and I couldn't swallow it. The boys shouted, 'Get up Tutsis. All the Tutsis stand up.' There was a boy from my hill at home. We went to primary school together, and he said, 'You Odette, you sit down, we know you've been a Hutu forever.' Then some other boy came and pulled my hair and said, 'With this hair we know you're a Tutsi.'

Hair was one of the great signifiers [of Tutsi identity. In the 1950's, Belgian missionaries had come to Rwanda and remarked: 'One of the most surprising phenomena of Rwanda's human geography is surely the contrast between the plurality of races and the sentiment of national unity. The natives of this country genuinely have the feeling of forming one people. There are few people in Europe among whom one finds these three factors of national cohesion: one language, one faith, one law.'

Despite this unity, the European colonists divided the nation against itself. The Belgians could hardly have pretended they were needed to bring order to Rwanda. Instead, they sought out those features of the existing civilization that fit their own

ideas of mastery and subjugation and bent them to fit their purposes. Colonization is violence and there are many ways to carry out violence. In addition to military and administrative chiefs, and a veritable army of churchmen, the Belgians dispatched scientists to Rwanda. The scientists brought scales and measuring tapes and callipers, and they went about weighing Rwandans, measuring Rwandan cranial capacities, and conducting comparative analyses of the relative protuberance of Rwandan noses. Sure enough, the scientists found what they had believed all along. Tutsis had 'nobler', more 'naturally' aristocratic dimensions than the 'coarse' and 'bestial' Hutus. On the 'nasal index', for instance, the [average] Tutsi nose was found to be about two and a half millimetres longer and nearly five millimetres narrower than the Hutu nose.

Then, in 1933-34, the Belgians conducted a census in order to issue "ethnic" identity cards, which labelled every Rwandan as either Hutu (eighty-five percent) or Tutsi (fourteen percent) or Twa (one percent). The identity cards made it virtually impossible for Hutus to become Tutsis, and permitted the Belgians to perfect the administration of an apartheid system rooted in the myth of Tutsi superiority.

[But back to Odette's story.] Odette was neither tall nor especially skinny, and on the 'nasal index' she was probably about average for a Rwandan. [But a hundred years after the ethnic identity cards had been introduced, these ideas led to] a boy in Rwanda torment[ing] Odette because she liked to wear her hair combed in soft waves.

[Odette continued her story:] 'The director of the school, a Belgian woman, said of me, 'Yes, her, she's a Tutsi of the first category, take her.' So we were expelled. Nobody was killed there. Some girls were spat at in the face, and made to walk on their knees, and some were beaten. Then we left on foot.'

From: Philip Gourevitch: *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed With Our Families*; pub. Picador Extracts from pages 56 & 66

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