

Beyond Rescue: Learning from the Narratives of Resisting Genocide Perpetrated against Tutsi in Rwanda in 1994

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Executive Summary

- Narratives of resistance to the genocide in 1994 highlight identity formation that is likely to benefit post-genocide Rwanda’s nation building.
- In-depth interviews with ten rural farmers and intellectuals who actively resisted the genocide, in 1994, highlight their wish for their actions to be explicitly acknowledged and considered separately from either being victims or perpetrators of the violence.
- The RPF-led government’s effort to promote a national identity, can take advantage of these narratives of resistance. Particular programs such as Ndi Umunyarwanda’ (I am Rwandan), can draw from the alternative identity-based claims found in these narratives of resisting genocide in 1994 to further promote the envisioned responsible citizenship.

Introduction

There is a need in post-genocide Rwanda to move beyond the bi-polar notions of either being a victim or a perpetrator of genocide. The post-genocide government has strived to draw from lessons learned from its violent past to use home-grown mechanisms to rebuild the nation. Since 1994, the importance of the country's programmes to build a cohesive national identity and educate citizens as a means of genocide prevention is undeniable. For the last fifteen years, President Paul Kagame's speeches articulate the vision of a 'unified', 'dignified', and 'self-reliant' nation of 'Rwandan fellows'. Recently, Hutu people who, in 1994, despite the risk to their own lives, resisted the genocide against their fellow Tutsi and, rescued potential victims fit the category of being selected and rewarded as 'Abarinzi b'Igihango na Gihanga cyahanze u Rwanda' (lit. *guardians of alliance with Gihanga, the founder of Rwanda*).

This policy brief draws on semi-structured interviews with ten Hutu from the then Bugarura cell, now Kigoma sector, Nyanza district, and the former National University of Rwanda (NUR). These individuals all resisted perpetrating the genocide that targeted their fellow Rwandan Tutsi in 1994. These accounts highlight their important claims for further recognition beyond the current focus on rescue. This policy paper outlines how this research could be drawn on by the government of Rwanda to identify how people who resisted the genocide can be included in relevant programs. The on-going campaign of 'Ndi Umunyarwanda' would be well-suited to address such claims. Including accounts from those who resisted the genocide can help in further promoting the envisioned national identity, which is expected to emerge from a fostering of responsible and auto-resourced citizenship.

Summary of the Findings of Resisting Genocide in Rwanda in 1994

In this study, respondents' accounts on how and why they resisted the genocide against their fellow Tutsi highlight their active exercise of critical thinking that was supported both individually and, collectively, by community dynamics. At the outset, it is important to note the complexity of genocide, which drew from a highly oppressive discourse that sought to engage all the people who fit within the then-constructed identity of Hutu in a program to exterminate those classified as Tutsi. The latter ethnicity was portrayed as an obstacle to the wellbeing and security of Hutu. Much as Hutu people committed genocide as

part of their perceived self-defence against Tutsi, they also targeted Hutu who resisted the violence. In spite of the hugely constraining context of extreme violence and the risk to their own life, some Hutu were able to resist and they form the focus of this study.

The empirical material suggests three types of resistance: physical violence, argumentation and avoidance. The use of violent resistance, through slamming, punching, stoning, slapping, and threats to use further violence, did not aim to kill genocide perpetrators but rather sought to deter their actions. In addition, rather than drawing on established State structures of authority, the organisation of this resistance drew on other forms of social authority such as gerontocracy. The forms of non-violent resistance included verbally arguing against the genocide, with the goal of warning and dissuading genocide perpetrators alongside actively avoiding contact with genocide perpetrators, which enabled the rescue of some of the targeted Tutsi people.

The faith-based and socio-professional antecedents of the respondents formed part of their motivations to resist. Respondents also drew on other forms of social authority such as gerontocracy and family ties to sustain their resistance, which was articulated as an alternative form of self-defence against the genocide. It is strikingly that the respondents resisted despite having ascertained that they would have very limited capacity to change the wider outcomes of the genocide. It is important to acknowledge the courage of this decision and to understand what made this type of critical action possible.

This study shows that the respondents now ascribe their experiences in 1994 to a complex identity formation of their image of self as separate and distinct from the killers and built on the relations with those they endeavoured to rescue. This is clear in their discussion of their critical response to genocide in 1994 which they saw as an ordinary choice in response to an extraordinary time of violence. To illustrate, a respondent from the former Bugarura cell asserts the following:

What else do you think we would have done? (...) There was a government that failed in its primary responsibility of protecting citizens. We, as citizens, were made to organize ourselves and perform its job (...) We did not do that for any particular government, party or movement, be it RPF (...) We wished we were able to do more against the killers who had invaded our cell to kill our people (...) Was it not our

right to assure protection and self-defence against people that unjustly wanted to kill our neighbours?

The next account from a former NUR student is similarly salient as to what enabled him and his neighbours to critically respond to mobs of genocide perpetrators who sought to destroy the Tutsi in their locality of Samuduha, now in Muhanga district. He identifies how the politicisation of both the violence and resistance shows how resisting the violence should be seen as a relevant identification distinct from those who chose to participate in the violence. The importance of this distinction can inform the current political regime in its on-going processes of nation-making:

Until killings started, we were waiting to see those people who would dare to attack and kill their long-time neighbours (...) I personally never believed that violence could resolve any problems, as politicians vehemently preached (...) For citizens of Gitarama prefecture, at least, we had been suffering from discrimination. Reputed to be pro-MDR and against the MRND-CDR of President Habyarimana, we had less to gain from joining the extermination of Tutsi, violence which was planned by and for the political elites of the northern Rwanda, 'Bakiga' in order to maintain their political power. People who suddenly executed such things had little knowledge of what was happening (...) For my family and I, we deliberately chose resisting, not because we could do something to deter all the killings, but, at least, to show a difference response and to prove the killers wrong. They were not the ones to think they knew better than us as to what others had to do.

As the next section further shows, respondents who resisted the genocide in 1994 now seek to obtain a distinctive recognition beyond what they would perceive as the binary account of either being victims or perpetrators of genocide. In addition, their actions were wider than the limited idea of resistance to the genocide as being characterised by the action of rescuing the then potential victims. Alternative identifications, both individual and collective, that respondents convey in their narratives of resisting genocide in 1994 support, but also extend the current Rwandan government's perspective on acknowledging the full response of resistance towards genocide in 1994.

Identity Formation in the Narratives of Resisting Genocide

Accounts of resisting genocide in Rwanda in 1994 can contribute to the on-going construction of national identity in Rwanda. As the title of this policy brief highlights, this research suggests the need to move beyond a focus on rescue. It would be valuable to include an official consideration of another category of good actions, that of resistance. Rather than only highlighting specific people for the brave actions of resisting and rescuing others, respondents' urged policy-makers to emphasise a broader acknowledgement that there were Hutu people who resisted.

A respondent from former Bugarura cell asserts as follows, articulating his wish for his and others' actions of resistance to become a separate part of the history of the genocide:

What I would emphasize is that our experience should not ever be associated with either the people who committed genocide or its victims. We sometimes hear people saying that we are people who did not play any role. No! That is not true at all. We played a separate role, which must be recognised as such (...) While other Hutu were busy committing killing and looting Tutsi people, we stood against them and rescued the survivors. We even risked our own life. Why should not the role be acknowledged as such, with a full list of all the concerned people?

Another respondent from NUR formulates a similar invitation to shift understandings of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, or at least its effects, beyond victims/perpetrator classifications:

Things must change in people's minds regarding the history of the genocide perpetrated against Tutsi. Victims were essentially Tutsi, but not all Hutu were made and would be primarily considered as killers (...) It shocked me, when I resumed studies at NUR, in 1995-1996, and went abroad, to hear people thinking that everybody had to choose to either be a killer or be killed (...) The truth is, however, that we, some Hutu, refused the killings and thus made another group. We risked our lives, through fighting killers and otherwise saved lives of victims in order for the history of our actions to be rewarded as such. That critical action should not be associated, as it is now, with any other role, be it victim or perpetrator.

The above accounts show the need to further develop the various existing practices which, in the country and abroad, exalt and reward people who, amidst the oppressive genocide, resisted killings and were able to rescue potential victims. These people are currently recognized as ‘abatabazi’ (lit. rescuers), which, alone, confers upon them the status of guardian of the culturally exalted bravery of Rwandans. I refer to President Paul Kagame who, in his 2014 keynote while addressing the first recipients of ‘Abarinzi b’Igihango’ argued that Rwanda was destroyed by extraordinary actions and its rebuilding should draw from extraordinary effort. He labelled those selected for their role in rescuing potential victims of genocide in 1994 as the people whose brave actions saved the nation’s then subjugated image of self-reliance.

The government’s on-going effort to promote a national identity, can take advantage of the narratives examined in this research. The Ndi Umunyarwanda’ (lit. I am Rwandan) programme, which seeks to further promote responsible citizenship, can draw on the accounts provided by these resisters of genocide to continue to foster the still needed cohesion of the envisioned national identity. It is recommended that the government builds on this account of what constitutes resistance to work with both local leaders and researchers to develop a list of the appropriate qualifications of the Hutu people whose actions do qualify as resistance.