The Rwandan Genocide

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When Victims Become Killers: Colonialism, Nativism, and the Genocide in Rwanda
by Mahmood Mamdani

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Any student of Rwanda could observe that the 1994 genocide has induced a number of persons and organizations to devote their research capacities to document and explain it. There is no doubt that these analyses have contributed greatly to a better understanding of the Rwanda crisis, especially to the questions of how and why it happened. It is also evident that these analyses have been concerned with a certain mode of knowledge and have privileged certain research questions at the expense of others. Scholarship on the genocide has been divided between a dominant position that sees the violence as the instrument of choice of a select Rwandan political elite and a second position that views the violence as yet another example, though a particularly brutal one, of primordial passions frequently occurring in terra incognita, or as an outcome of "state failure".

Anybody reading the literature on the genocide would note three weaknesses. The first one is related to the fact that the research field is overwhelmingly dominated by "grand theories" explaining the outbreak of violence in terms of macro-level political, economic, or socio-cultural factors at play in Rwanda between 1990 and 1994. Second, the micro-level studies tend to identify individuals rather than processes when accounting for the genocide. More importantly, they tend to focus on the elite actors or victims, and within this latter group, often on Tutsi. Finally, in the smaller body of research attempting to answer the question of why so many people killed those with whom they were living side by side, few have tried to answer an equally puzzling question: whether, when and how taking this into consideration would affect the durability of peace. In this regard, this review sees Mahmood Mamdani's *When Victims Become Killers,* published seven years after the genocide, both as a synthesis of early analyses and a contribution towards rescuing the debate which finds itself *dans l'impasse.*

In his recent study of the roots of the Rwandan genocide, Mahmood Mamdani makes clear from the outset his intention to distinguish himself from previous scholars by approaching his subject from a different theoretical and methodological angle. Criticizing the field of area studies for detaching the empirical and setting it up in opposition to the theoretical, Mamdani sets out to present something new: to re-think existing facts and realities in light of re-thoughts contexts (p. xiii, xiv).

Mamdani's stated objective in writing *When Victims Become Killers* was to "make the popular agency of the Rwandan genocide thinkable" (p. 8). In his view, most previous scholars have focused too heavily on the leadership, leaving unanswered the "truly troubling question" of how that tiny group could convince the majority to kill or to acquiesce in the killing of the minority (p, 7, 18). In response to this question, Mamdani casts the Rwandan genocide as a "native genocide": as the violence of "yesterday's victims who have turned around and insisted on becoming masters of their own lives" (p. 12-13). He attributes this turn of events to the perverted legacy of the colonially inspired native/settler dialectic: a version of the Hamitic myth whereby social and ethnic identities were racialized and politicized - Hutu transformed into a deprived native identity, Tutsi into a privileged settler identity - and set in opposition to [against] one another. The workings of this dialectic and the failure of the 1959 revolution to fully deconstruct it enabled the Hutu leadership of the mid-1990s to manipulate the political consciousness of its citizens and incited them to kill one another. While the privilege of the settler was abolished, the political relevance of these identities remained as the settler was subjected to the majority, and customarily inherited, power of the "native". In sum, it is Mamdani's view that had the Belgian colonialists not only racialized the Tutsi into a politically privileged settler class but also "victimized" the Hutu by consigning them to a life of political inferiority, then there would have been no 1994 genocide.

It is from this theoretical starting point that Mahmood Mamdani sets out to tackle his main analytical challenge: to determine how and when Hutu was made into a native identity and Tutsi into a settler identity (p. 14). In so doing, he makes a number of important contributions to the existing literature. His highly political focus serves to clearly elucidate the way that historical and cultural identities can, and have been, manipulated by (colonial and post-colonial) elites to suit (disastrous) political ends.

This point is an important one in combating the widely held perception that African civil wars are simply modern manifestations of age-old tribal animosities. This perception is supported and probably perpetuated by the media outside Africa with depictions such as those of the events in Rwanda in 1994. Mamdani's work tends to challenge this popular perception of ethnicity being the principal cause of such violence by exposing the highly political nature of the violence in the form of the state's action. Thus, his work is valuable in suggesting that the quality and intensity of the group violence witnessed in 1994 in Rwanda could recur elsewhere in the continent and outside it. Mamdani's critical historical analysis of the causes of genocide in Rwanda constitutes a contribution to the deconstruction of the ideology of genocide in Rwanda, widely based it has been on false and corrupted historical premises. This ideology played a vital role in the maturation and the onslaught of the acts of extermination of April-June 1994.

Secondly, perhaps one of the most original and important contributions of Mamdani is that he highlights the regional ramifications of a deep crisis. He offers a rich description of the regional context in which the Rwandan civil war and genocide unfolded, particularly with respect to the experience of the Tutsi diaspora in the Ugandan Army (pp. 159-184), but also with respect to the complex web of refugee and citizenship politics in the Congo and (to a lesser extent) Burundi (pp. 234-263). Afraid that the Banyarwanda (considered globally as settlers) would use national representation to acquire power locally, "indigenous" people came to oppose citizenship rights to them. In the DRC, for example, the immediate practical consequence of being defined a citizen of non-indigenous origins was the denial of "customary access" to land since one would then not have own one's own native authority (p.238). This empirical contribution is carried forward and usefully informs Mamdani's analytical conclusions, where he highlights the very real fact that any sustainable solution to the problems faced by Rwanda must possess a strong regional dimension (p. 280). At the heart of the conflict in the Great Lakes and in many countries in Sub-Saharan Africa is the issue of citizenship. By bringing to the debate on genocidal violence the feeling of marginalization by many in the continent, Mamdani points out to a multi-dimensional crisis (segregation of civic rights from cultural status, annihilationist xenophobia, nationality-based exclusion from participation, nationality as constraint on voluntary migration and a vector of forced migration, gender-based discrimination in nationality and migration, and nationality and statelessness. This is a concern which has yet to emerge as a key problem of the scholarship and activism in Africa today.

Finally, Mamdani's third key contribution can be found in his basic methodological claim that more effort needs to be made by scholars to usefully link the theoretical and the empirical. Anyone reading the published research on the genocide of Tutsi in Rwanda is likely to be struck by the enormous number of studies produced on the topic by academics, journalists, and human rights activists. Important advances have been made in documenting and explaining the 1994 genocide. Yet, there is still a pressing need *to learn more on how to learn* about genocidal violence in Rwanda. Mamdani's work is a systematic critique of the methodological biases existing in the research field dominated by "grand theories", which analyze the genocide in terms of macro-level political, economic, or socio-cultural forces at work in Rwanda before 1994. A second bias is that within the emerging body of research focusing on the micro level, most of the analyses concentrate on individuals rather than processes when accounting for the genocide. Finally, even when looking at individuals, there is a tendency to focus on either the actions of elite actors or the detailed accounts of prisoners or survivors. This leads to implicit and explicit notions of political community and political action in Rwanda.

These important contributions aside, a number of conceptual, empirical, and methodological elements of Mamdani's work merit closer scrutiny. First, while Mamdani's focus on the political dimensions of the Rwandan crisis is certainly a strong point of his work, its extent and formulation may not be so. Indeed, Mamdani privileges the political at the expense of an adequate consideration of other factors and the interconnected nature of these factors with the political. Having usefully demonstrated how economic, social, historical, and cultural realities were co-opted and manipulated for political purposes, Mamdani assumes that once endowed with a political essence, these realities will automatically be most effectively dealt with through political means. This simplistic assumption, inspired by conceptual academic bias rather than the Rwandan reality, serves to obscure the nature of the many challenges Rwanda faces and misleads us as to the types of responses which are truly required. The political realm as a panacea permeates Mamdani's entire work but is laid bare in his concluding section on postgenocide reconstruction, where he argues that in order to achieve peace in Rwanda, "[o]ne needs to close with a sense of the real political obstacles that will face any attempt to democratize public life in postgenocide Rwanda" (p. 280).

A second conceptual shortcoming is found in the way that Mamdani equates correlation with causation, contribution with determinism. While Mamdani is on solid ground in illustrating the contributions of the colonial administration to the politicization of identity, it is not clear that he is equally successful in proving that, on the ground, this was the determining factor without which most, or at least many Rwandans would not have allowed the genocide to take place. While Mamdani identifies the problem of how this set-

tler/native dialectic took root in Rwanda as one of his main analytical challenges, he does not complete the causal link by devoting equal analytical attention to the related question of how this settler/native dialectic was subsequently transformed into individual decisions to kill.

This last conceptual shortcoming is related to a key methodological decision: namely, to deal with "existing facts" as presented by previous authors (without scrutinizing the rigor and relevance of these facts as distinct from the contexts in which they were presented), and to forego conducting substantive empirical research of his own. Mamdani seems to assume, rather than prove, that the political discourse of the native/settler narrative was sufficiently ingrained in the consciousness of ordinary Rwandans for it to become a determining factor in each person's decision to kill or not to kill. The question of how it was successfully transformed into an incitement to kill, and the role of other factors in this transformation and in individual decisions on whether or not to participate (such as threats to be killed if one did not kill, the promise of economic spoils, the dehumanization of the Tutsis), are not sufficiently scrutinized. Of the twenty-two interviews cited in his book, only one pertains to the grassroots motivations of citizens to participate in the genocide, and this account is not only second hand but also one which contradicts Mamdani's thesis by highlighting economic and psychological motivations rather than the political operation of the settler/native narrative.[1] Indeed, while Mamdani asserts that "for the Hutu who killed, the Tutsi was a settler, not a neighbor", he offers no empirical evidence to suggest that in the minds of ordinary Rwandans, this was the case.

Mamdani's treatment of the empirical record of the Rwandan genocide as already "established" seems to have also lessened his imperative to ensure that the theories he presented were consistently supported by concrete empirical examples. For example, a previous review of *When Victims Become Killers* challenges Mamdani's treatment of the use which was made of this narrative by the elite in the years preceding the civil war and genocide. René Lemarchand[2] notes (p. 308) that the racist "settler" propaganda spewed by Radio Mille Collines and which was certainly a major factor in inciting people to kill only got underway in earnest after the 1990 attack by the RPF (Rwandan Patriotic Front), and perhaps should be understood as a response to it, rather than simply as a continuation of a longstanding narrative put forth by the Hutu leaders, as Mamdani asserts.

While Mamdani's goal of promoting the integration of the theoretical and the empirical is laudable, his deductive approach (whereby he takes the theory from his previous book on post-colonial citizenship in Africa and applies it to the Rwandan context) leads him into conflict with the empirical record. As a result, his work tends to neglect the growth of the academic field of comparative genocide studies that responds more directly to the complex and multifaceted situation of Rwanda. This has been a general tendency of much of the published research in the field.

Mamdani's concluding section on postgenocide reconstruction, while full of suggestions, tends to throw away such slogans as: *" in post-genocide Rwanda Tutsi want justice and Hutu want democracy"*. He makes reference neither to the justice and reconciliation efforts painstainkingly taking place in Rwanda, the challenges that have been encountered, the lessons that have been learnt, and what these real-world experiences have shown us about the applicability of particular theoretical models of justice , reconciliation and reconstruction (including those which Mamdani advocates), nor does he try to problematize justice and democracy, while claiming a contextual approach.

Perhaps, because Mamdani's point of reference is theoretical, he tends to evaluate deductively Rwandan efforts according to the extent to which they mirror abstract models or other historical manifestations thereof (whether they be analogous to the Rwandan context or not). For example, in advocating a solution which he terms "survivor's justice", Mamdani declares that Rwanda is off course *not* because the approach it has taken differs fundamentally from the principled description of survivor's justice (defined as "…the choice [made by the victor] of reaching out to the vanquished on terms that have the potential of transcending an earlier opposition between the two"), but because the way this approach has manifested itself in Rwanda (reforming institutions and blaming those who manipulated them as a basis for unity) does not coincide with the pre-existing manifestation of it (namely the post-Soviet approach of blaming institutions of rule and absolving individuals, as a basis for unity) that informs Mamdani's deductive approach (p. 272). The result is a disconnection between theory and practice: not quite the outcome that Mamdani hoped to achieve. To correct this imbalance, Mamdani would do well to draw from the rich theoretical and micro-level contributions of the field of genocide studies.

Furthermore, Mamdani's deductive methodological approach and conceptual focus on the political realm at the expense of other realms, prevent him from fulfilling his commitment to fully elucidating the popularly perpetrated nature of the genocide. As we have noted above, his analysis of the settler/native dialectic is highly deterministic and does not focus on the variables associated with individual choice. Similarly, his section on solutions holds individuals, and not leaders, accountable. The popularly perpetrated nature of the genocide and the necessarily populist nature of any attempt to reconcile the affected population, is lost in his blind application of the Nuremberg model on the Rwandan context. The effect is that even his victors' justice model—the model that Mamdani casts as the prime approach for securing individual accountability—focuses on institutions rather than people.

In the end, Mamdani does not fully answer one of the main questions he set out to tackle: how a tiny group of leaders could convince the majority to kill the minority. What he successfully does is uncover and deconstruct the heavily political rhetoric used by the elite to incite the population and the historical circumstances that enabled this rhetoric to resonate with so many people. This contribution is important, as the legacies of colonialism must be understood better. However, Mamdani may have overemphasized the role of this one factor at the expense of others, and underemphasized the interconnected nature of the political with the social and economic. This tendency is regrettable, as it is one that transfers easily from academic analysis to practical planning, limiting the effectiveness of policy responses to genocide before they get off the ground.

These concerns not- withstanding, Mamdani's book certainly makes an important contribution to the understanding of this unfortunate period in Rwanda's history and to the understanding of the regional ramifications of the crisis. However, the gaps are too critical to leave unfilled. The hope is that Mamdani and others will pay attention to this in subsequent works. Further research will gain a great deal more depth, not only in integrating comparative genocide studies theories, but also in paying more attention to the psychological dimensions when accounting for the Rwandan conflict. For example, while analysing the widespread nature of sexualised violence during the 1994 genocide, one is struck by the intrusion of cruelty in the heart of the political life. A closer look would indicate that in the early phase, Tutsi women constituted a specific target of the hate propaganda. Four of the "Ten Commandements" of the Hutu published in December 1990 refer to women[3], and Hutu women are among those who have committed sexualised violence against them[4], one of the most famous being Pauline Nyiramasuhuko, former Minister of Women Development detained in the Arusha-based International Tribunal[5]. □

Notes

[1] See note 97 of Chapter 7, p. 336. In a book boasting 553 footnotes, Mamdani cites 22 interviews conducted over a period of anywhere between 15-45 days: 9 interviews conducted over 12 days in Rwanda, 12 interviews conducted over anywhere from one day to one month in the Congo, and 1 interview conducted over one day in Tanzania. All but four interviews are found in the chapters on the Genocide (7) and the refugee and citizenship crisis in the Congo (15. Most of these interviews treat questions of fact (pinning down particular events), rather than questions of opinion, impression, or personal motivation.

[2] Rene Lemarchand, "A History of Genocide in Rwanda", *Journal of African History*, 43 , 2 (2002), pp. 307-311.

[3] See, generally, Jean-Pierre Chrétien *et al*, *Rwanda les médias du génocide*, Paris, Éditions Karthala, 1995 ; Pancrace Twagiramutara, "Ethnicity and Genocide", in Okwudiba Nnoli, ed., *Ethnic Conflicts in Africa*, Dakar, CODESRIA, 1998 pp.119-120.

[4] See Urusaro Alice Karekezi, *Juridictions Gacaca, Lutte contre l'Impunité et Promotion de la Réconciliation Nationale*, 2001. On the documentation of the systematic and widespread nature of sexualized violence , see René Degni-Segui, Special Rapporteur on Rwanda, *Report on the Situation in Rwanda*, under para. 20 E.CN.4/5-3/1 of 25 May 1994, U.N. ESCOR, 51st Sess. Agenda Item 12, para.28, U.N. DOCE.CN.4/1995/7.

[5] On the role of women during genocide, see particularly African Rights, *Not So Innocent*, 1997. The sexualized violence committed by women against other women took various forms, including extraction of sexual organs, neutralization while being raped and incitement or other facilitation.