The Rwandan Genocide

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


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 on 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, 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: 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 theoretical discourse, Mamdani sets out to present something new: to rethink 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 the principal cause (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 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 incite them to kill one another. While the privilege of the settler was abolished, the political relevance of these identities remained as the settler was subjugated 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 “vic”-sualized 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 make the 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 mod-ern manifestations of age-old tribal aninonisties. 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 ethnicty being the principal cause of such violence by exposing the highly politi-cal nature of the violence in the form of the state’s action. Thus, his work is not only theoretical but the quantity and intensity of the group violence witnessed in 1994 in Rwanda could recur elsewhere in the continent and outside it. Mamdani’s critical historical analy-sis of the causes of genocide in Rwanda constitutes a contribution to the theoretical discourse of geno-cide 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, par-ticularly with respect to the experience of the Tutsi diaspora in the Ugandan Army (pp. 159-184), but also with re-spect to the complex web of refugee camps, and organizations (p. 230) 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-indig-enous origins was the denial of “cus-tomary access” to land since one would then have not one’s own native authority (p.238). This empirical con-triurbation can be found in his basic theoretical work, its extent and formulation may not be so. Indeed, Mamdani privileges the political at the expense of an ad-equate consideration of other factors and the interconnected nature of these factors with the political. Having use-fully demonstrated how economic, social, historical, and cultural realities were co-opted and manipulated for politi-cal purposes, Mamdani assumes that once endowed with a political essence, these realities will automatically be most effectively dealt with through political means. This simplistic ass-sumption is an unfortunate conceptual aca-demic bias rather than the Rwandan real-ity, 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 has a momentous role to play in 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 democra-tize public life in postgenocide Rwanda” (p. 280).

A second conceptual shortcoming is found in the way that Mamdani equates correlation with causation, con-triurbation with determinism. While Mamdani is on solid ground in illus-trating 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 fac-ctor 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-

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ler/native dialectic took root in Rwanda as one of its 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 forgo conducting substantive empirical research of his own. Mamdani seems to assume, rather than prove, that the political discourse of the native/setter 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 Tutsi), 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. 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 his book did not impose models or con-"}

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.


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.