

False, historical, ‘accusations in a mirror’? The *Tutsi Colonisation Plan*, conspiracy, and genocide in Rwanda

1. Introduction

The historical memory of conflict is an important factor in genocide and ethnic violence. Even if we discard accounts of genocides as inspired by unchanging 'ancient hatreds', real or imagined grievances and prior conflicts provide a rich reservoir of symbols and narratives. These could be instrumentally or sincerely deployed to divide populations, warn of prior atrocities that might be repeated, identify scores to settle, and recast the current conflict as an existential struggle (Kaufman, 2006).

Often, these memories might be deliberately distorted or reinterpreted. Historical memory may correspond to the past, but it is shaped, rearticulated, and consumed in the present. In Rwanda, news sources like *Kangura* and RTLM repeatedly (and deeply anachronistically) spread the idea that Tutsis represented 'Negro-Nazi movements thirsty for blood and power' (Kangura, 1990a), or 'proudly marched under the swastika of their criminal ancestor Hitler' (Kangura International Version, 1992, p10). Such Tutsi-Nazi equivalencies were a key theme throughout Hutu power discourse of the time (RTLM, 1994a, p7; 1994b, p5; 1994c, p22). In other cases, elites might overstate the equivalency between the past and present. In Serbia, a key theme of the rhetoric used to justify ethnic cleansing, and in some cases, genocidal violence was the idea that its neighbours were on the verge of 'physical, political, legal, and cultural ... genocide' (SANU, 1986) against the nation. Slobodan Milosevic warned that his citizens might be 'subject to genocide for the second time in this century' (Belgrade TV, 1992), and the idea of imminent threat was a particular spur to violence by Republika Srpska. It is difficult, as an outside observer, to suggest that this was the case. However, Milosevic and others did at least offer a skewed vision of an increasingly polarised Yugoslavia during its final years.

How far can this distortion go? How far could genocidal ideologues stretch the historical record, and what impacts did this have on those who consumed, shared, or drew on them? In this blog post, I explore an example where the distortion of history reached particularly extreme levels. In the so-called 'Tutsi Colonisation Plan', published in the infamously pro-genocide magazine *Kangura* in Rwanda in 1990, the authors developed a wholly fictitious conspiracy theory that encouraged its readers to reinterpret their relationships with their Tutsi neighbours drastically. I suggest that this act of sudden reinterpretation made it particularly effective as a tool of genocidal incitement. By offering a reading of historical and contemporary politics that was superficially consistent with what they already knew, but had drastic and dire ramifications for the near future, its authors could encourage their audiences to engage in genocidal violence.

2. The Colonisation Plan and the Commandments

The '*Tutsi Colonisation Plan*' was published as the leading story in *Kangura* in November 1990 (Kangura, 1990b). While its true authorship was unclear – Chrétien suggests it was a likely the creation of the Zairean and Rwandan governments during the 1980s (Chrétien, 1991, 113), while Kirschke sees it as a 'clearly fictitious' document devised by *Kangura*'s anti-Tutsi editors (Kirschke, 1996, 38) – it purported to be a letter written by Tutsi leaders in August 1962, just after Rwandan independence, to the Tutsi resistance.

The *Colonisation Plan* claimed to detail a list of instructions to Tutsis about how to subvert, betray, infiltrate, and enslave the Hutu population. This included exhortations to 'use fear to affirm their authority over the naive bantu masses', 'to give the Bahutu civil servants an inferiority complex', and to 'try to colonise them all'. Much of the document was simply anti-Hutu insults, referring to them as 'naive', 'greedy' for 'beer and money', 'ignorant and ambitious', 'not car[ing] about their own kind', and 'born to serve'. Crucially, it supposedly implicated all Tutsis as military threats, not just those involved in military activities. Tutsis from across Rwandan society were to be part of this planned subversion: 'youths will be required to support the Tutsi territorials and use terror', and intellectuals were to 'carve a niche in the administration', the better to 'propagate political ideas among the ignorant masses', and money would supposedly be fraudulently acquired from the Catholic church. Women, in particular, were to be used to undermine Hutu national will and independence. The supposed authors gloatingly encouraged their audience to 'offer [Hutus] our girls, and if necessary give them in marriage, as the Bahutus will find it difficult to resist their angelic beauty'.

It is widely recognised that propagandists might accuse their enemies of planning acts of subversion, terror, or other atrocities, in order to justify pre-emptive actions against them. Indeed, Des Forges describes the 'accusation in a mirror' strategy used in Rwanda, where propagandists attribute the violent or extreme actions they support to the enemy, in order to justify enacting them themselves (Des Forges, 1999, 58). If this was true, however, why the historical focus? Why fabricate historical records of crimes conducted nearly thirty years ago, outside the living memory of most Rwandans at the time, as opposed to modern-day instances of oppression?

I suggest that this may have been because placing this conspiracy in the past (and present) made it much more pressing than one that was supposedly intended for the future. A 'newly discovered plan' supposedly written in 1990 would only show that there was an *intention* to carry out a large-scale subversion of Rwandan society. It might not be as credible in its claims about Tutsi neighbours, colleagues, and family members who were already well-known and trusted by the reader, and who might be expected to behave in a trustworthy manner and not join in a plan of subversion. If they were supposedly members of a longstanding conspiracy to oppress Hutu society, however, then their behaviour could take on a sinister cast, while still being superficially in line with the actual history of coexistence. Each role of responsibility assumed could be interpreted as an attempt to seize power over supposedly naive and servile Hutus. Each bottle of beer sold could be an attempt to appeal to their supposed greed. Each Tutsi wife of a Hutu man could be reinterpreted (as de Brouwer summarises) as a 'sexual weapon that would be used by the Tutsis to weaken and ultimately destroy the Hutu men' (De Brouwer, 2005, 12). This might be especially convincing in light of the RPF invasion of Rwanda in October 1990, and the beginning of the Rwandan Civil War. Readers might be led to reassess their views of those same neighbours as having always been part of this kind of fifth column, posing an intimate threat from within their communities, workplaces, and even families. As mentioned above, the *Colonisation Plan* supposedly implicated the entire Tutsi community in this.

This is a hypothesis, and an extension of the internal logic of the *Colonisation Plan* onto its Hutu readership. How might we tell if such a hypothesis is accurate? Given the complex, multicausal nature of genocidal societies, the fact that I do not have easy access to what the Hutu audiences of the time were thinking, and the danger of overstating the role of propaganda in the Rwandan genocide, it is important not to jump to conclusions. Nonetheless, I suggest that certain elements of the ensuing violence do give credence to this notion of the impact of historical conspiracy theories.

Shortly after the *Colonisation Plan* was published, *Kangura* published an implicit response to it, in the form of the '*Hutu Ten Commandments*' (Kangura, 1990c, 8). These directly responded to points supposedly 'revealed' in the *Colonisation Plan*. Among these Commandments were the prohibition of economic activity with Tutsi (since 'all Hutus must know that all Tutsis are dishonest in business'), an

injunction to seize control over the education system to avoid Tutsi indoctrination, and simply to 'stop taking pity on the Tutsi'. The *Ten Commandments* were particularly focused on Hutu-Tutsi gender relations, responding to the notion in *Colonisation Plan* that Tutsi women had married into Tutsi families as a 'sexual weapon'. Four of the ten commandments warned about this infiltration. The very first claimed 'a Tutsi woman, whoever she is, works for the interest of her Tutsi ethnic group', and others argued that Tutsi women were untrustworthy, malevolent, seductive, and a security risk. In short, *Kangura* (or a likeminded anti-Tutsi provocateur created fake and supposedly longstanding Tutsi plans for Hutus in the form of the *Colonisation Plan*. Once they had been discovered, they published harsh measures to 'counter' these, in the form of the *Ten Commandments*.

Evidence of the impact of this is mixed, but there are several indications that these documents did play a role in causing, shaping, and directing violence.

During the 'Media Trial' of the *Kangura* editors, the prosecution adduced multiple credible witnesses describing the *Ten Commandments* as an effective incitement to violence, including the killing of spouses and parents (ICTR, 2003, pp.47-53). Nowrojee's studies of sexual violence against Tutsi women seems to have reflected many of the concerns raised in the *Colonisation Plan* and *Ten Commandments*. During some attacks, Hutu rapists claimed that while Tutsi women had previously been 'destroying the country with their seduction', now 'the tables have turned so now [they could] satisfy [their] sexual desires' (Nowrojee, 2007, p365). Others told their victims that 'you Tutsi women think that you are too good for [Hutus]' and were 'too proud', but 'now we [Hutu militias] can have Tutsi women for free' (Nowrojee, 2007, pp.365-6). While it is difficult to demonstrate that these attitudes came directly from *Kangura*, and may have reflected broader social prejudices, the way that perpetrators asserted that this was a longstanding turning of the tables is highly suggestive. To return to my earlier counterfactual, if the *Colonisation Plan* had supposedly been written in 1990, there would not be the same sense of historical grievance on display here. The reinterpretation of family and gender relations as a 'trojan horse' for ethnic oppression seems to have played a role in the character of the violence.

Straus, interviewing perpetrators, found that only 5.9% of those asked admitted they had heard of the *Ten Commandments*, but that those who *had* heard of it were the most violent of the sample (Straus, 2013, pp.130-134). While we should not over-estimate the reach of the *Ten Commandments*, this would imply they did have a disproportionately large impact in radicalising their audience. Alternatively, those already radicalised sought *Kangura* out - but this would still position them as eager to consume and take on the framings *Kangura* offered. Additionally, while *Kangura* had a fairly small circulation (Higiro, 2007, 80-81), social reading practices in Rwanda (Kagwi-Ndugnu, 2007, pp.332-333) and promotion on RTLM (ICTR, 2003, p316) arguably did allow it to reach a wider audience than might have been expected.

3. Conspiratorial thinking and genocide further afield

This is a blog post; as such, the analytical depth I can offer here is limited. Nonetheless, I do sketch out a peculiar form of fabricated/distorted historical memory, and its role in promoting genocidal violence. Propagandists claimed to 'discover' historical plans to infiltrate and subvert society, whose interim outcomes were superficially consistent with what their audiences saw in their communities. In doing so, they could recharacterise ordinary ethnic coexistence as evidence of a longstanding plot of subversion and oppression. This turned civilian and non-combatant members of the target group into active players in a secret ethnic supremacist plot, and, in the context of a broader racist and genocidal movement, encouraged the shocked audience to respond to them as such - violently.

The *Tutsi Colonisation Plan* is hardly the only example of this. Chrétien compares it to the *Protocol of the Elders of Zion* (Chrétien, 1991, 113), and the comparison is an apt one. Another document

fabricated by intelligence services and then widely disseminated as 'evidence' of a longstanding Jewish plot, it did not simply suggest a malevolent plan somewhere off in the future. Rather, as Levy notes, it described a threat that was very much already present: 'a two-thousand-year-old, arcanelly elaborated Jewish conspiracy, possessed of an astounding intelligence network and directed by a committee [who] already stage manage world events and are near their final victory' (Segel and Levy, 1996, 4). As with the *Colonisation Plan*, this attempted to recharacterise the fact that Jews were not obviously threatening as evidence of just how far the supposed conspiracy had spread, providing additional urgency in a way that a document warning of a plan yet to come might not have achieved. Also like with the *Colonisation Plan*, the Protocols were used to justify contemporary violence, serving as a linchpin in Nazi genocidal mobilisation (Cohn, 1996, 222).

Other, less-well-known examples, seem to represent a similar phenomenon – of the fraudulent reinterpretation of 'forgotten', 'unknown', or 'newly-discovered' history to posit a long history of secret oppression posing as innocuous coexistence. In Yugoslavia, alongside the *actual* exhumation of artefacts of ethnic conflict whose memorialisation was discouraged by the Titoist government (Denich, 1994, 370-381), authors like Vuk Draskovic developed a mythology of intense and ongoing Muslim oppression of Serbs, within living memory, that had been covered up. His 1982 novel '*Knife*' described post-Second World War ethnic coexistence as being built on a lurid history of gang rape, torture, and murder by dehumanised Muslim 'Ustashe' against Serbs. The titles of similar books in this genre, such as Momir Krsmanovic's 'The Blood Stained Hands of Islam' and 'The Drina Runs Red With Blood', Slobodan Selenic's 'Timor Mortis', and Marjorie Radulovic's 'Rage of the Serbs', speak for themselves (Macdonald, 2002, 138-9). While fictional, these texts encouraged readers to interpret contemporary Yugoslav politics as heralding imminent genocidal violence against Serbs, and seem to have been influential. Draskovic rose to political prominence based on his literary career (Vujacic, 1995, p240), while paramilitary leaders like Branislav Lainovic cited '*Knife*' as a key reason for their participation in violence (Cigar, 1995, p25).

4. Conclusion

This is a niche example of genocidal discourse – a distinctive form of historical fabrication and conspiratorial thinking that is neither sufficient nor necessary to cause genocide in its own right.

Nonetheless, this tactic - the fraudulent 'discovery' of historical conspiracy or oppression, that continued into the present day, and encouraged the re-evaluation of contemporary coexistence or ethnic mingling as evidence of threat rather than of harmlessness – should encourage us to think about genocidal tactics more broadly. In such a model, even if a group is seemingly innocuous, this is merely evidence that its members are particularly sneaky infiltrators. Even if they are mostly groups typically thought of as non-combatants – such as shop-keepers, teachers, or family members – this is merely evidence of how far they have spread their influence. Thinking about how genocidal propaganda draws upon notions of conspiracy theory and seemingly innocuous threat in such a way links such observations to similar dynamics of intimate, infiltrating threat common in discourses of genocidal dehumanisation, as well as how would-be genocidal perpetrators characterise their targets as a 'threatening' force.

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