

**Topic:** *How do historians and human scientists give knowledge meaning through the telling of stories? Discuss with reference to history and the human sciences.*

The history of the Rwandan Genocide is embedded with misconceptions and false narratives that fueled hatred and animosity between the citizens of Rwanda. The Rwandan Genocide was a 100-day period during which almost one million Tutsi and Hutu were killed in April-July of 1994. These killings were fueled by the racial divides created by Belgian colonialism between the Rwandan ethnic groups: the Hutu, the Tutsi, and the Twa.<sup>1</sup> The Rwandan Genocide was the product of the spread of false stories delivered to fulfill the superiority of European Powers. They devised historical stories and stories relating to the human sciences to create their own narrative and control the knowledge being received by the Rwandans. The Rwandan Genocide was a prime example of how historians and human scientists gave

knowledge meaning through the telling of stories, but in a manner that was used to fulfill self-serving and power-hungry motives.

The human sciences were used through the subject of Phrenology to justify the social hierarchy in Rwanda. Phrenology is defined as, “the study of the conformation and especially the contours of the skull based on the former belief that they are indicative of mental faculties and character.”<sup>2</sup> Colonizers from Belgium used this pseudoscience to divide the population of Rwanda as they favored the physical features of the Tutsi population. They believed that the color of the Tutsi population’s skin and their facial features were more similar to European features and therefore they were the superior group of people in Rwanda. The Tutsi were treated with an advantage during the Belgian occupation of Rwanda as they had greater access to opportunities and the Hutu population was treated as inferiors. Zadi states that, “the

institutionalization of ethnic differences through a series of discriminatory reforms and administrative systems that favored Tutsis during the colonial era.”<sup>3</sup> Through phrenology, the Europeans spread an untruthful narrative of lies that placed a wedge between the Hutus and the Tutsis. The implementation of this false science to justify the racial segregation of the two groups revolutionized the manner in which Hutus and Tutsis interacted with one another and the social stratification of Rwandan society. They preyed on the vulnerability of Rwandan society and fed them knowledge under the flawed pretenses that these facts and claims were reliable scientific knowledge. Stories of Tutsi supremacy became highly prevalent in Rwanda and the Europeans used their phrenology findings to justify the racial segregation of the Hutus and the Tutsis. Phrenology became the guiding principle in Rwandan society as citizens were unable to refute these findings and instead learned to live

under these conditions. European stories held great weight in Rwandan society and citizens followed the world of the European with blind faith.

European historians had theorized the “Hamitic Hypothesis” and this became the concrete explanation for the Rwanda’s history. This information was taught and further spread in Rwandan schools as it became a core part of their education and a fundamental theory in establishing the social divides in Rwanda. The Hamitic Hypothesis stated that there once existed a “Caucasoid” race from northeastern Africa which created civilization in “Black” Africa. This was the European narrative of Rwandan history that was built upon western feelings of superiority. Through colonization, this story became regarded as the true origin story of Rwanda and contributed to the divide of the Hutus and the Tutsis. Preceding the transmission of this false narrative across Rwanda, the Tutsis were viewed as higher than the Hutus in the

Rwandan social hierarchy as, “[t]he identification of Tutsi pastoralists as power-holders and of Hutu cultivators as subjects was becoming general when Europeans first arrived in Rwanda at the turn of the century, but it was not yet completely fixed throughout the country.”<sup>4</sup> But the Hamitic Hypothesis served as an instigator which cemented different ideas of social divide in Rwandan society. The Hamitic Hypothesis dictated that the Hutus were closer in ancestral relation to the “Caucasoid” race that was hypothesized to have created black civilization. Therefore, this new theory showed that, the Hutus were superior to the Tutsis and due to the value placed on European education, this narrative was readily embraced and accepted by the citizens of Rwanda. As a result of the spread of this new theory, “[a] Hutu Power ideology emerged, grounded in the Hamitic Hypothesis, in which Tutsi were recognized as foreigners to Rwanda, rather than an indigenous ethnic group.”<sup>5</sup> This shows how history was

manipulated by the storyteller to construct a narrative that appeased the Europeans. Despite the lack of factual evidence, this mythical story was regarded and interpreted as a real event from history. The origins of Rwanda had been a topic of speculation for centuries and the Rwandans believed this story being proposed by the Europeans because they had no prior knowledge or reference to look back at and compare this story to.

Both of these false narratives that were spread by the Europeans increased animosities and tensions between the Tutsi and Hutu populations in Rwanda. With the human sciences, false scientific beliefs were dispersed under the façade of being credible and certain as real science. The Europeans utilized phrenology as a tool to further globalize their sense of superiority and insert it into Rwandan culture. The racial discrimination associated with the oppression of the Hutu population became the result of these pseudoscientific misconceptions which made

the subjugation of Rwanda easier for Belgian colonizers. The Hamitic Hypothesis was a nonexistent story regarding the origins of Rwanda which was manipulated further to create divides within the Rwandan population. The Europeans employed it with the intent of retaining European supremacy in the idea that they were responsible for the creation of black civilization. The Europeans aligned themselves with the Tutsi population due to the findings of phrenology and in doing so worsened relations between the Hutus and the Tutsis. I think that with both these stories from history and the human sciences, the political climate and Europe's immense influence played a huge role in determining how this knowledge was given meaning. Western culture was often and still is glamorized and as Rwanda was being colonized, they accepted this new culture and the knowledge that came with it. Rwandans placed a great amount of value in European influence and

power that this historical and scientific knowledge being brought to them through stories of the Europeans was deemed valuable and truthful. With stories of different group supremacy, these ideals were integrated into Rwandan culture as the Hamitic Hypothesis became a part of Rwandan education. These surpassed the point of being stories as children were raised under these ideals and social hierarchy became a distinct feature of everyday life. Opportunities for education or jobs were more plentiful for the Tutsis as their lives became easier with the presence of the Belgians due to colonization. The Hutus were forced to endure mistreatment for years and watched as their Rwandan counterparts received more respect and far better treatment by the Europeans and in Rwandan society in general.

The meaning that was conveyed through this knowledge waged anger and animosity between the different groups in Rwanda that

escalated into the Rwandan Genocide. When the Rwandans finally gained independence from the colonial rule of Belgium, the Hutus viewed it as their chance to stand up against the Tutsi supremacy. For years the Tutsis were viewed as the elite class of Rwanda, but the speculative stories of the Hamitic Hypothesis proposed a different narrative that supported the supremacy of the Hutus. These differing stories each void of an evidentiary basis incited a rivalry between the different classes in Rwanda that soon became violent. The Hutus had spent the entirety of the colonial era being exploited by European powers due to their apparent inferiority, whereas the Tutsis reigned as the supreme ruling class in Rwanda, held on a pedestal by the Europeans.<sup>6</sup> The Rwandan Genocide broke out following their independence from colonial rule and Rwandan society was facing dire instability. The crumbling of their social infrastructure that had ruled

Rwandan life for so long placed the Tutsi population in a vulnerable state as the Europeans were no longer there to consolidate their rule. The stories and theories of the supremacy of different groups propagated by European powers had impacted Rwanda in a huge way. The atrocities that occurred in Rwanda were a direct result of these false narratives and wrongly appointed meaning to this manipulated knowledge of the Europeans that was spread to the Rwandans.

## Sources

C;, André. "Phrenology and the Rwandan Genocide." Arquivos de neuro-psiquiatria. U.S. National Library of Medicine. Accessed February 19, 2022. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/29742244/>.

"Leave None to Tell the Story: Genocide in Rwanda, March 1999."  
History (HRW report - leave none to tell the story: Genocide in

Rwanda, March 1999). Accessed February 19, 2022. <https://www.hrw.org/reports/1999/rwanda/Geno1-3-09.htm>.

“Phrenology Definition & Meaning.” Merriam-Webster. Merriam-Webster. Accessed February 19, 2022. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/phrenology>.

“Rwanda.” College of Liberal Arts. Accessed February 19, 2022. <https://cla.umn.edu/chgs/holocaust-genocide-education/resource-guides/rwanda>.

Zadi, Awa Princess E. “The Hamite Must Die! the Legacy of Colonial Ideology in Rwanda.” CUNY Academic Works. Accessed February 19, 2022. [https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc\\_etds/4153/](https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_etds/4153/).

Haydock comments:

This is a really interesting and very nicely focused analysis of this question. My only concern is that you not generalize what happened in Rwanda to the practices of all historians and human scientists. Make some effort to point out that this use of stories represents bad faith on the part of those who made these interpretations. Your introduction should point out that this is an example of how stories can be distorted for malevolent purposes.

If you are using footnotes you must include notes at the bottom of the page. Use the THSSSWG for formatting instructions.

2

Good example of phrenology. I would like to see a little bit more information on the “science” behind phrenology. You might set this science against the backdrop of the period of imperialism to indicate how human scientists worked to justify racists myths that then propelled and justified national policies.

I would like to see a source that supports the idea that this racist ideology was adopted by the people of Rwanda themselves. This would strengthen this point.

3

Wow! The whole section on the Hamitic hypothesis is really very good and totally on point. Very nicely done!! The only complaint I have is that I can't tell what your sources are. Again, footnotes must have notes.

Overall

This is an excellent essay. It is a great example of the stream over the island approach, as the whole analysis flows together beautifully. As I indicated above, I would like to see a little more background on the history and development of both theories. You do a great job of describing the impact of the theories, but their origin is less thoroughly analyzed.

Your commentary on page four is also a little general. Perhaps use this space to make specific connections between these 19th century ideologies and the conduct of the genocide itself.