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Genocide, Evil and Human Agency: the Concept of Evil in Rwandan Explanations of the 1994 Genocide

by Jennie E. Burnet, Associate Professor, Department of Anthropology, University of Louisville

Abstract

Evil, conceived of as the opposite of good, is defined by a moral system and thus cannot be abstracted as a portable theoretical concept to be applied cross-culturally. David Parkin solved this problem by assuming a “common awareness of evil acts” and then raising “the question of how and to what extent certain kinds of behavior and phenomenon come to be identified by this or a comparable term” (Parkin: 1985, p. 224). Following this same methodology, this chapter explores the ways Rwandans made sense of their experiences of violence during the civil war (1990-1994) and genocide (April – June 1994) by mobilizing the concept of “evil.” Based on several years of ethnographic research in urban and rural Rwanda, I found that Rwandans mobilize three competing conceptions of evil to understand genocidal violence: the personified presence of Satan who inspired humans to perpetrate evil acts, genocide perpetrators as evil by nature, and genocide perpetrators as possessed by Satan or evil spirits. These understandings emerge from the layered systems of religious belief (competing indigenous systems of religious belief and practice, Roman Catholicism, Protestantism, and *abarokore* (born-again Christian) movements) that form the cosmological system that frames good and evil for Rwandans. The Roman Catholic Church, on the other hand, counters these understandings of evil and assert that the evil acts of the genocide were a result of humans’ free will, greed, and their rejection of Christian values.

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Introduction

While few cultural anthropologists practicing today would be willing to label culturally-bound human behaviors as “evil,” many apply this label to the gruesome individual and collective acts that constituted the 1994 genocide of Tutsis, politically moderate Hutus, and others defined as an “enemy of the state.” Because evil, conceived of as the opposite of good, is defined by a moral system, its application in a particular context involves moral judgment and violates the principle of cultural relativism, which lies at the heart of American anthropology. Furthermore, on the continent of Africa the concept of evil is inextricably tied up in European imperialism and its judgments of indigenous African cultural practices, in particular spiritual and religious beliefs and practices. Since evil is bound to a moral system, it cannot be abstracted as a portable theoretical concept to be applied cross-culturally. David Parkin solved this problem by assuming a “common awareness of evil acts” and then raising “the question of how and to what extent certain kinds of behavior and phenomenon come to be identified by this or a comparable term” (Parkin 1985: p. 224). Following this same methodology, this chapter explores the ways Rwandans made sense of their experiences of violence during the civil war (1990-1994) and genocide (April – June 1994) by mobilizing the concept of “evil.” This chapter is based

on several years of ethnographic research in urban and rural Rwanda between 1997 and 2014.¹

Contemporary Rwandan conceptions of evil have emerged from the unpredictable entanglement of competing indigenous religious beliefs and practices with imported colonial religions (predominantly Roman Catholicism, but also including several Protestant sects such as Lutheran, Anglican, Seventh Day Adventist, Presbyterian, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Pentacostalism).² From its first entry into Rwanda in 1900, the Roman Catholic Church, "stifled the development of syncretic religious sects" by adopting an exclusivist stance vis-à-vis indigenous religious beliefs and practices (Taylor: 1992, p. 62): these heterogenous beliefs and practices were universally labeled as "evil" and "pagan." As a result, Rwandans followed "either a mission religion or a 'traditional religion' or both," but they did not combine them (Taylor: 1992, p. 62). Even up until the present, many Rwandans participate in several religious cults simultaneously although often secretly so as to avoid punishment by the local parish priest or bishop by being excluded from Holy

¹ The ethnographic data analyzed and presented in this paper was gathered during fieldwork conducted in Rwanda between 1997 and the present with different research questions in mind. These data consisted of participant observation conducted in a middle class neighborhood in Kigali, Rwanda (9 months) and a rural community in southern Rwanda (12 months). The author visited many other communities across the country and interviewed ordinary Rwandans, civil society organization members and leaders, religious leaders, and local government officials. For a more detailed explanation of the research methods, see Burnet: 2012, pp. 23-33.

² The impact of these Protestant sects has often been localized to regions where large missionary outposts were established (for example, around the Adventist missions at Rwankeri in the North, Ngoma in the West, and Gitwe in central Rwanda many inhabitants practice Seventh-Day Adventism (Ngabo: 2008, p. 57).

Communion or other rites of the church.³ Rwandan moral understandings of the world are simultaneously shaped by these different, sometimes contradictory belief systems.

Between April 6 and July 4, 1994 at least 500,000 Rwandans,⁴ primarily Tutsi as well as politically-moderate Hutu and other defined as “enemies of Rwanda,” lost their lives in a state-sponsored genocide. The genocide occurred in the context of a civil war that had begun on October 1, 1990 when the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) rebel group attacked Rwanda with the intention of liberating the country from President Habyarimana’s dictatorship. The civil war continued throughout the early 1990s until Habyarimana’s government was forced to the negotiating table. The 1993 Arusha Peace Accords brought an official end to hostilities and outlined a transition plan to move the country to multiparty politics and democratic elections. The transition, which had been limping along, was brought to a dramatic and violent halt on April 6, 1994 when President Habyarimana’s plane was shot down by unknown assailants. Hutu extremists took control of the government and perpetrated a genocide against Tutsi and others defined as enemies of the state.

³ In some parishes in Rwanda, excommunication is a common practice. During fieldwork in a rural community in southern Rwanda, approximately 30 Catholics were excommunicated by the parish priest for attending the traditional wedding ceremony of two practicing Catholics who did not also marry immediately in the church. They were told that in order to receive Communion again, they would need to attend adult catechism and renew their membership in the church by undergoing the rite of confirmation again.

⁴ Estimates of how many people died in the 1994 genocide vary widely. While how many died is irrelevant to whether or not the killings in Rwanda in 1994 were genocide, the issue is highly politicized so it is necessary to indicate the sources. The number I use here comes from Alison Des Forges, *Leave None to Tell the Story: Genocide in Rwanda* (Human Rights Watch, New York, NY, 1999), p. 15. For more on the numbers of dead see Scott Straus’s analysis in Scott Straus, *The Order of Genocide: Race, Power, and War in Rwanda* (Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY, 2006), pp. 41-64.

The massacres and other atrocities committed by soldiers, militiamen, and civilians against their neighbors and kinsmen were beyond the social imagination of most ordinary Rwandans. These acts constituted an abrupt departure from the social contract. Whether people were hunted like quarry and killed by the Interahamwe militias, mobilized to participate in the killing, or witnesses to the horrors around them, Rwandans struggled to make sense of these terrible events in their aftermath. While their explanations and methods of coping were as heterogeneous as their experiences of violence, they mobilized three competing conceptions of evil to understand genocidal violence: the personified presence of Satan who inspired humans to perpetrate evil; genocide perpetrators as possessed by Satan, demons, or evil spirits; and humans exercising their free will and being led astray by greed, jealousy, or other human weaknesses. These understandings emerge from the imbricated systems of religious belief and spiritual practices, including competing indigenous spiritual beliefs and practices, Roman Catholicism, Protestantism, and *abarokore* (born-again Christian) movements, that form the cosmological system that frames good and evil for Rwandans. The Roman Catholic Church, on the other hand, counters these understandings of evil and asserts that the evil acts of the genocide were a result of humans' free will, greed, and their rejection of Christian values. Protestant sects take a variety of positions, but the growing *abarokore* movement tends to privilege the idea of possession, whether by Satan himself or by evil spirits. Efforts to explain the genocide as extraordinary and having spiritual, as opposed to human, origins may make it easier for genocide survivors to live and worship alongside those responsible for killing their loved ones.

The Concept of Evil in Indigenous Religious Beliefs and Practices

Indigenous religious beliefs and practices in Rwanda consisted of a heterogeneous mix of ancestor worship, spirit possession, witchcraft, and sorcery that varied by region.⁵ As Iris Berger noted “spirits, myth, and ritual” did not form a “unified system” that flowed together through time and space” (Berger: 1981, p, 66). All Rwandans recognized a supreme creator called “Imana” who was the origin of all things in the universe but who did not interfere directly in human lives (Arnoux 1912; d’Hertefelt 1962).⁶ While Rwandans believed Imana was everywhere and in all things since he created them, believers performed no rites to honor him. Imana was perceived as essentially good, and misfortune or evil were never attributed to him but were rather thought to be caused by spirits of the dead, known as *abazimu* (d’Hertefelt: 1962, p. 79).

According to Rwandan mythology, Imana created a universe of three “countries”: the terrestrial world inhabited by humans, the superior country (or the sky), and the underworld inhabited by the spirits of the dead (d’Hertefelt 1962). While the *abazimu* inhabited the underworld, they often visited the living on earth. Like Imana, the *abazimu* were invisible and immaterial. Rwandans conceived of humans (and animals) as being composed of a visible part, the body, and an invisible part, the shadow. It was the union of the body and shadow, which constituted life. When this union was broken, the shadow was

⁵ As the scholarship of Alison Des Forges (1986, 2011), Catharine Newbury (1978, 1988, 1998), and David Newbury (1991, 1997, 2001, 2004) has demonstrated, representations of precolonial Rwanda as a centralized state with a homogenous culture obscure the great diversity of beliefs and practices across the region known today as Rwanda.

⁶ In Rwanda today, Christian churches of all sects and Muslims in Rwanda use this word, “Imana,” to refer to God in Kinyarwanda. In the early 20th century, however, the first Roman Catholic mission in Rwanda instead used the Swahili word, “Mungu,” for God (Linden 1977). The German Lutheran mission established in 1907 began to use the word Imana for the Christian God (Linden 1977).

transformed into an *umuzimu*, “spirit.” According to d’Hertefelt who was writing about the late colonial period, “the living constantly worry about the spirits, almost obsessively. They have the power to make men sick or to disrupt the smooth function of their affairs” (d’Hertefelt: 1962, p. 81).⁷ In Rwanda today, practicing Christians and Muslims continue to worry about spirits, especially the spirits of loved ones who died in unknown circumstances during the civil war or genocide and who never received a proper burial.

According to indigenous beliefs, there were several different kinds of *abazimu*, both good and bad. The most important were the ancestor spirits called *abakurambere* (the ones who came first) that protected every Rwandan lineage and household. Rwandans viewed the ancestor spirits as enmeshed in the daily lives of the living. Thus, they took care of them by providing shelter in small ancestor shrines built inside the compound walls and giving food and drink in the form of offerings left in the shrines. While ancestor spirits might cause periodic difficulties in the lives of the living to express their displeasure, they could not be the source of evil. They were easily placated once the living divined their displeasure through a ritual known as *guterekera*, which involved the manipulation of objects passed down through the family (Taylor: 1992, p. 122), and then took the ancestor spirits’ desired action. Beyond their spiritual aspects, the ancestor cults and *guterekera* practices served to reinforce fealty to the lineage.

Parallel, but distinct, religious practices created a secondary community of support for the individual, thus they often attracted people marginalized from their lineage or community (d’Hertefelt 1962). Bizarre misfortunes or persistent symptoms were usually attributed to *abazimu* from outside the lineage who were honored through distinct

⁷ All translations, unless otherwise, noted are by the author.

religious cults called *kubandwa*. The *kubandwa* were particularly strong *abazimu* understood to be the heroes in Rwandan myths (d’Hertefeldt 1962). Participation in *kubandwa* cults was widespread across Rwanda; however, as Iris Berger notes, *kubandwa* referred generally to heterogeneous ritual practices that were not always analogous (Berger: 1981, p. 66). In all regions, the legends about *kubandwa* were closely related to “the formation and expansion of new states and class systems” (Berger: 1981, p. 58). For example, David Newbury (1991) documents the importance of a specific set of rituals on Ijwi island and their dialectical relationship to state power—rites that were historically produced and in turn produced history. Similarly, the Nyabingi cult, which venerated the female spirit, Nyabingi, became popular in northeastern Rwanda and emerged as a millenarian movement resisting against the imposition of the central court’s authority over formerly autonomous regions (Des Forges and Newbury: 2011, p. 103). Beyond veneration of Nyabingi, the “dogma of the cult” varied by region, and “anyone who had been moved by the spirit could serve her; anyone who could convince others that he had been so moved could intercede with her on their behalf” (Des Forges and Newbury: 2011, p. 103) Another cult venerating the male spirit, Ryangombe, had become widespread in Rwanda in the 18th century (Des Forges and Newbury: 2011, p. xxxiv). While it likely became popular “as a focus for alternative loyalties to the state,” Mwami Rujugira and other leaders appointed “a resident ‘leader’ of this cult at the Court” to integrate it with the supernatural powers of the *mwami* and the *abiru*, ritual specialists responsible for maintain the spiritual integrity of the *mwami* and Rwanda (Des Forges and Newbury: 2011, p. xxxiv).

The rites of the ancestor worship cults, *kubandwa*, Nyabingi, and Ryangombe converged with Rwandan healing practices and witchcraft beliefs. The ancestor spirits or

numerous other *abazimu* might afflict certain individuals, households, or lineages with particular illnesses. As Christopher Taylor described of Rwanda in the 1980s, “bizarre, persistent symptoms or serial misfortunes lead sufferers to suspect a spiritual origin to their illness. Often they consult an *umupfumu*⁸ to affirm or deny this suspicion” (Taylor: 1992, p. 141). The *abapfumu* along with many other ritual and healing specialists with particular names, such as the *abacunyi* (“healers”) who knew various herbal medicines and forms of healing, divined or diagnosed spiritual illnesses, helped to cure them, and made charms to protect patients from further trouble (d’Hertefeldt 1962). As in many other African regions, certain ritual and healing specialists could also provide the poison (*uburozi*) necessary to cause trouble for an adversary. Rwandan beliefs about and fears of poison (*uburozi*), which can administered through material and spiritual forms, persist into the present and strongly shape their habits. For examples, family members suspect poisoning in deaths easily explained by modern medicine, such as a stroke, evoking Evans-Pritchard’s classic question related to Azande witchcraft beliefs, “Why should these particular people have been sitting under this particular granary at the particular moment when it collapsed?” (Evans-Pritchard: 1937, p. 69). In any home, celebration, restaurant, or bar in Rwanda, the server will only open a bottle (whether beer, soda, or water) in the presence of its drinker as proof that it has not been poisoned.

Christianity in Early Colonial Rwanda

Christianity entered Rwanda in the early years of the 20th century along with European colonizers. Rwanda became part of the protectorate of German East Africa during

⁸ *Umupfumu* (*abapfumu*, pl.) is a ritual specialist (“diviner”) who detects which spirit (or spirits) are causing the problems. Some *abapfumu* also practice rites to calm the spirits.

the Berlin Conference of 1884-5, but there was very little contact between Europeans and the territory, except for a few explorers who passed through, until 1899 when the Germans decided to effect their authority over the country (van't Spijker: 1990, p. 12). With the backing of the German colonial administration, the Society of the Missionaries of Our Lady of Africa (popularly known as the White Fathers) established the first Roman Catholic mission in Rwanda in 1900 at Save which was located 20 kilometers from the seat of the royal court at Nyanza (Des Forges and Newbury: 2011, p. 27-28). The French cardinal Lavigerie had founded the White Father order in 1868 in Algiers exclusively to work in Africa (Des Forges and Newbury: 2011, p. 27; Linden: 1977, p. 29). Its central African missions were an expansion of its work in Islamic northern Africa, and thus its evangelization was adapted to converting Muslims rather than the so-called "pagans" as the European priests referred to Africans who practiced indigenous religions.

Even before its founding, the Save mission played an important role in Rwandan politics. Policy makers in Rwanda's central court, comprising the Queen Mother, Kanjogera, and her brothers who ruled in the stead of Mwami Musinga who was still a child, decided that the missionaries' religious teaching should be limited to the Hutu and Twa (Des Forges and Newbury: 2011, p. 29; Linden: 1977, p. 33). The official policy of the White Fathers was to "convert from above" (Taylor: 1992, p. 53) so this decision initially thwarted the White Fathers' preferred methods of conversion (Des Forges and Newbury: 2011, p. 29). Although the missionaries rejected the central court's first two proposed sites, which were far from central Rwanda where the court's influence was the strongest, they eventually agreed on a location 20 kilometers from Nyanza (Taylor: 1992, p. 53, Linden 1977).

The first Protestant missionaries arrived in Rwanda in 1907. They were German Lutherans from the Bethel Society (van't Spijker: 1990, p. 27). They established the Betheler Mission in the region of Kirinda in 1907. Although the Protestant mission at Betheler would prove to be successful, Rwanda was to be dominated by the Roman Catholic mission and eventually the Roman Catholic Church. Over the course of its history in the region, the Roman Catholic Church alternately sided with the masses and with the elite of Rwandan society. At times, organs with the church were in conflict with each other over where to stand.

The *mwami* and central court recognized the Christian missionaries as important emissaries of the colonial state and appreciated their potential value as a means of influencing the German colonial administrators. Nonetheless, they worried about the potential nefarious effects of Christian religious practices on the ritual magic responsible for maintaining the health of the *mwami* as well as the health of the kingdom (Des Forges and Newbury 2011). The health of these two bodies—of the *mwami* and of the state—were intricately linked in the Rwandan worldview (Taylor 1992). As virtually all ritual attached to the *mwami* or the kingdom was secret, the *abiru*, ritual specialists of the central court, assumed the Christian missionaries had their own secret rituals and potentially evil magic that they kept secret.

The Roman Catholic and Protestant churches forbid participation in any so-called “pagan” practices, including the *kubandwa*, Nyabingi, and Ryangombe cults as well as the important familial obligations to honor the ancestors through the rites of *guterekera*. Christian converts faced sanctions by the Church if they “were caught” participating in “pagan” rites (Linden: 1977, p. 102). These sanctions could include public beatings,

temporary detention in the church tower, or expulsion from the Church community (van't Spijker 1990). When early converts to Christianity refused to participate in the *guterekera* practices, they found themselves under attack by non-Christian members of their families (van't Spijker: 1990, p. 168). The converts were often accused of being the cause of difficulties, sicknesses, unhappiness/bad luck/evil, and even of being bewitched by the Europeans (van't Spijker: 1990, p. 168).

Most Christian converts continued to attend *kubandwa*, Ryangombe, and Nyabingi ceremonies and practice the ancestor worship cults in secret at home (Linden: 1977, p. 101-2). For example, some catechumens attended animal sacrifices of the *kubandwa* cults as an antidote "to avert any evil consequences of baptism" (Linden: 1977, p. 102). Nonetheless, Roman Catholic priests and Protestant missionaries characterized virtually the entire panoply of indigenous religious practices as "evil" along with many aspects of Rwandan culture, such as polygyny. According to Linden, the White Fathers understood "Imana" as "a High God, and therefore 'good,' so Ryangombe and Kiranga, it followed were 'bad'" (Linden: 1977, p. 44). An 1897 entry in the White Fathers journal, *Chroniques Trimestrielles*, described Ryangombe as "the evil spirit, the Ahriman of the Rundi, compared with the Ormuz, the principal of God" (cited in Linden: 1977, p. 49). In Burundi, the White Fathers described the *kubandwa* cults as the "Devil's Sabbath" (Linden: 1977, p. 44). Priests frequently spoke at length with recently baptized converts about the spiritual dangers of the *kubandwa* cults as consorting with Satan and "Satan's henchmen" (Linden: 1977, p. 45). In 1903, the diary of the Save mission of the White Fathers, the priest described women dancers as "Satan's henchmen" (cited in Linden: 1977, p. 49).

Religious Practices in Post-Colonial Rwanda

By the late colonial period, a generation of male youth, including the Tutsi cadre groomed for government administration along with a small group of Hutu intellectuals, had been educated almost entirely in Roman Catholic schools. This generation had been groomed to view the indigenous Rwandan religious beliefs and practices as so-called “pagan superstitions,” “uncivilized,” and “evil.” This generation strived to distinguish themselves from the uneducated masses by attending church weekly and marrying Christian women in religious weddings in churches among other practices. They officially avoided polygyny by only marrying a single woman although many also kept additional women “on the side” in extralegal, unofficial marriages. Despite these efforts to maintain a public image of Christian piety, many of these educated men continued to participate secretly in traditional cults.

Among the uneducated masses, ordinary Rwandans did not hesitate to observe indigenous spiritual practices and imported colonial religions simultaneously. During his fieldwork in 1985, Gerard van’t Spijker, a Presbyterian missionary, found that the great majority of Christians and non-Christians still practiced the traditional burial and mourning rites (van’t Spijker: 1990, p. 246). Although the Christian mission had consistently and blanketly prohibited the traditional, “pagan” rituals, the majority of Rwandans chose to participate in at least some of them. Van’t Spijker reported the reactions of some Rwandan church members:

many [Rwandan] Christians were convinced that the missionaries followed their own rituals of mourning, (*kwera*) without explaining their secrets to Rwandan Christians. For example, in 1982, the missionary E. Johanssen wore

special clothing after the death of his mother, and then after a certain period of time, he again wore his regular clothes. We had concluded that the Johanssen family had finished their rites of *kwera* (van't Spijker: 1990, p. 169).

Thus, many Rwandans held onto their indigenous practices secretly because they perceived that the Europeans also observed their own secret practices.

Concept of Evil in Racist Propaganda and Extremist Media in the early 1990s

In the early 1990s racist propaganda and the Hutu extremist media helped create a social context where genocide appeared to be a rational solution by many Rwandans. Propaganda targeted the Rwandan Patriotic Front rebels and their supporters, moderate Hutu politicians who advocated for democratization and an end to the state party's monopoly on power, and Rwandans of Tutsi ethnicity. The concept of evil played a significant role in demonizing the RPF, members of the opposition political parties regardless of their ethnicity, and Tutsis as a group.

Propagandists and supporters of President Habyarimana, his MRND political party, and Hutu extremist political portrayed the RPF's mission as restoring monarchy to Rwanda, bringing back feudalism, and reinstating the servitude of Hutu people. In a popular song played frequently on an extremist radio station, singer Simon Bikindi sang, ...the servitude, the whip, the lash, the forced work that exhausted the people, that has disappeared forever. You, the great majority [*rubanda nyamwinshi*], pay attention and, descendants of Sebahinzi, remember this evil that should be driven as far away as possible, so that it never returns to Rwanda (cited in Des Forges: 1999, p. 77).

In these lyrics Bikindi characterizes Tutsi feudalism as evil, but listeners understood that he also meant to characterize the RPF rebels as evil. During my fieldwork in Rwanda in 1997 and 1998, several Rwandans recently returned from the refugee camps in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo recounted stories of elderly Rwandans who marveled that RPF soldiers did not, in fact, have pointy ears or tails as they were led to believe by extremist propaganda and rumors circulating in the refugee camps. Hutu extremists also portrayed Hutus in political parties opposed to the MRND and extremist political parties aligned with the MRND as evil or as the devil. In an infamous speech in late 1992, Leon Mugesera equated Prime Minister Dismas Nsengiyaremye, a member of the MDR political party and a Hutu, with the devil (Des Forges: 1999, pp. 84, 111).

In the years leading up to the genocide and during the genocide itself, the extremist media referred to Tutsis as snakes. This metaphor evoked both indigenous Rwandan aversion to snakes and Biblical representations of Satan as the snake who led Eve astray in the Book of Genesis. In the same speech mentioned above Mugesera evoked Biblical imagery of the snake when justifying the need to “massacre this gang of bastards,” referring to the RPF rebels, “It is written in the Gospel, you know it, if the snake comes to bite you and you leave it to slip among you, it’s you who will perish” (Chétien: 1995, p. 56). These representations of the RPF rebels as snakes continued up until the genocide began in April 1994. During the genocide, these metaphors were also applied to so-called “RPF accomplices,” meaning all ethnic Tutsis and those Hutus and Twas who supported political parties opposed to the MRND and CDR parties.

During the genocide, the Hutu extremists used this snake metaphor as well as the concept of evil to frame the genocide as a civil war where the use of force against the RPF

rebels, Tutsis, and others opposed to the genocide constituted a legitimate self-defense against both a spiritual and material enemy rather than as a crime against humanity. On 21 April 1994, on the eve of massacres in one community, witnesses said the burgomaster (mayor) used a Rwandan proverb to explain the danger posed by the RPF and their “accomplices,” (Des Forges: 1999, p. 468): *Iyo inzoka yizilitse ku gisabo ugomba kikimena ukabona uko uyica*. Literally “If a snake is curled around a gourd, you do everything necessary to kill it.” In other words, you even break the gourd and incur the misfortune that comes with breaking a gourd to eliminate evil. Listeners understood that he was giving orders to kill Tutsis. On 1 June 1994, a subprefet in Butare prefecture wrote to the burgomasters, “Search everywhere in the commune for the enemy because he is clever and can sneak in like a snake” (Des Forges: 1999, p. 419). During an attack in Nyakizu commune on April 22, 1994, a genocide perpetrator threatened, “You are snakes. Your god does not exist. We will exterminate you” (Des Forges: 1999, p. 401). These metaphors identified RPF soldiers and their “accomplices” as Satan himself or at least as the embodiment of evil in its most obvious animal form. This use of the concept of evil framed the genocide as legitimate self-defense rather than as a crime against humanity.

The Hutu extremist media portrayed the civil war as a Biblical battle between Good and Evil with President Habyarimana serving as a Christ-like savior (Chrétien: 1995, p. 326). During the genocide the extremist media continued to demonize the RPF and Tutsis. In an RTLM broadcast on June 12, 1994, announcer Kantano Habimana said, “...and you have heard that, since the *Inkotanyi* [RPF rebels] assassinated the bishops, the priests and the nuns ... all people of the Church have cursed them beginning with the Pope ... and God himself has abandoned them... and even Satan is no longer willing to welcome the

Inkotanyi" (Chrétien: 1995, p. 197). Since leaders of the Roman Catholic Church in Rwanda did not make any public statements opposed to the genocide or any statements to counter the extremist media, many Catholics at the grassroots-level interpreted the Church's silence as tacit approval of statements like these and of the genocide as a whole.

Evil and Human Actions during the 1994 Genocide

Drawing on this cultural repertoire of entangled religious practices and beliefs, Rwandans made sense of the obscene violence of the 1994 genocide in terms of three different evocations of evil: (1) Satan himself walking among men and directing the violence, (2) genocide perpetrators as possessed by Satan, Satanic spirits, or evil spirits, and (3) humans falling prey to the dark side of free will where they were led astray by human weakness. Each of these interpretations relies on different combinations of indigenous Rwandan and imported Christian belief systems.

The first interpretation of genocidal violence emerges from an understanding of Satan in a human form walking among men and directing the violence. In my fieldwork in Rwanda, I first heard this evocation of evil in 1997 from a male (Tutsi) genocide survivor who was a devout Catholic. In the midst of recounting his story of survival, he characterized genocide perpetrators and their actions, "It was as if everyone had lost his mind, and Satan walked among them leading their attacks. People you thought were your friends, your allies, suddenly turned on you. *You can never know what is in the heart of a man.*"⁹

This interpretation of evil as the personification of Satan can be tied to Roman Catholic and Protestant perceptions of the Ryangombe cult. Most common in northern Rwanda, the Ryangombe cult attributed great power to the spirit Ryangombe who helped cult

⁹ Author's interview, Kigali, Rwanda, July 1997.

practitioners by protecting them from evil spirits sent by their enemies to attack them. During the colonial period and afterward, the Roman Catholic and Protestant missionaries taught that Ryangombe was Satan who was leading people astray. Timothy Longman documented a similar explanation from a man in Gisovu:

What we saw in this country surprised us. These were things commanded by the devil. There were people who were good, who stayed calm. But there were others who were Interahamwe. These were everywhere in the country. Everywhere they went, they sowed disorder, killed people, stole cattle, pillaged (cited in Longman: 2009, p. 322).

In this passage, the man describes the Interahamwe militiamen as Satan's army who overran the country. A European priest evoked an almost identical explanation of the genocide when he told me, "These things are beyond comprehension. It was the work of demons."¹⁰

Some genocide perpetrators also make sense of their own actions in terms of being visited by Satan. One perpetrator repeatedly said that no one had been killed in his community and insisted that neither he nor his neighbors had participated in killing. During the long interview, I kept coming back to the issue as he had disclosed at the beginning of the interview that he had been released from prison for time served after confessing to his crimes. Finally, on the fourth attempt, he began to answer my questions.

Author: What did you confess to?

Man: I confessed that I participated in an attack that killed a person. There is no use trying to hide what happened.

¹⁰ Interview by the author, March 2014, Kigali, Rwanda. Author's translation from the original French.

Author: How did this attack unfold?

Man: This attack happened when we were going to loot a cow and then we killed a person from there.

Author: Why did you participate in this attack?

Man: There are times when the enemy, Satan, comes to visit you and you follow him like that.

Author: How did Satan come to visit you that day?

Man: At that time, I sold meat, I had a butcher shop. Someone told me he had a cow he could sell me cheaply. I went with him and some others. The cow was outside a house. We took it and then the people who stayed behind began to beat the cow's owner, and then they killed him. There you have it, that is why they say I'm among the killers.¹¹

When this man stated, "the enemy, Satan, comes to visit you and you follow him like that," he formulates his actions in a Pentacostal idiom. Pentacostal pastors in Rwanda portray Satan as a presence among humans who constantly tempts and tests true believers. Born to parents who practiced only indigenous spiritual practices, this man had a conversion experience at the age of 16 years (20 years before the genocide) when white, Pentacostal missionaries came to his community. During the interview, he mentioned numerous times that his religious beliefs kept him from going to join the Interahamwe groups who were leading the genocide in the region. In the passage quoted above, he underlines the contingency of his choice when he begins, "there are times when." Later in the interview he again characterizes his participation as a momentary lapse in judgment, "there are

¹¹ Author's interview, October 2013, Rutsiro district, Rwanda. Author's translation from the original Kinyarwanda and French.

moments when you fall into a trap and then after you notice and you can't continue in this path." From this Pentacostal cosmology, Christians must maintain constant vigilance as Satan can appear on your doorstep as a friend or neighbor with a cow to sell and the next thing you know you are participating in a man's killing.

The second interpretation of genocidal violence perceives genocide perpetrators as possessed by Satan, Satanic spirits, demons, or evil spirits. I first heard this interpretation evoked in 1999 when I was speaking with two widows in their sixties whose husbands had died in the refugee camps in Zaire (now Democratic Republic of the Congo). Both women were devout Catholics and well educated for their ages, fluent in French and holding secondary school degrees. In the midst of explaining to me the ways the genocide had eroded sexual morality in Rwanda, one of the said,

During the genocide, men ran around doing whatever they wanted. They took [unmarried] girls and did what they wanted with them. They killed. They did other terrible things. It was like they were possessed by Satan. If you looked in their eyes, you could see something evil there.

From a moral standpoint, this understanding of the evil acts committed during the genocide appears to erase human responsibility. How can a man be responsible for his actions if he is possessed by Satan? Given that these women's husbands had held important positions in the MRND political party and Habyarimana government, the men had occupied, at best, morally ambiguous positions during the genocide. The interim, genocidal government required government officials to enact its policy of genocide. While a few, courageous people simply refused, such as the prefet (governor) of Butare prefecture who was killed for his refusal, the majority found themselves in a position where they could no

longer remain on the sidelines or whereby remaining on the sideline implicated them in the deaths of civilians at the hands of the Interahamwe militias or government soldiers. In this context, it would have been difficult for these women's husbands to avoid participating in the genocide in some way.

In an interview in 2014, the same European priest invoked this second interpretation of evil when recounting what he had witnessed during the genocide.

Three men came to the gate after nightfall. [He pauses, shivers, and then shakes his head as if to erase an image from it, then continues.] They were the personification of the Devil. Their eyes were empty. They were sweating profusely and covered in blood. Their clothes were hanging from them in tatters. In their hands, they carried machetes, hammers, nail-studded clubs, chains. [He pauses again, removes his glasses and wipes his eyes, and then continues.] Their weapons were also covered in blood and had shreds of flesh hanging from them. To see them was to become insane. This image haunts me.¹²

The third interpretation of genocidal violence perceives genocide perpetrators' evil actions as a result of the free will God granted humans. Roman Catholic priests, nuns, and lay ministers frequently explained the genocide from this perspective in the years after the genocide. They employed this explanation when speaking to their congregations as well as to foreign researchers. From this point of view, Rwandans who participated in the genocide chose to do evil instead of remaining in the "righteous path." Within Christian theology, this explanation is one of the few that can be used to explain why terrible things happen to good

¹² Interview by the author, March 2014, Kigali, Rwanda. Author's translation from the original French.

people if God is good. As a Rwandan priest and (Tutsi) genocide survivor explained to me in 2001,

You see my uncle there [pointing at his intoxicated uncle]. When I see him, I sometimes wonder what God was thinking sparing him and then allowing my Uncle [name deleted] to perish in the genocide. Uncle [name deleted] was the head of the family. He did everything for me when I was a child. Paid for my school, paid for my uniforms, helped me get a place at the junior seminary. But, that's how things happened in the genocide: the good ones were killed and we were left with the others.

At another time, the same priest explained that the many evil acts that made up the genocide could be understood as humans choosing to deviate from the Christian path.

Occasionally, ordinary Rwandans evoked a similar explanation of the genocide drawing on indigenous understandings of human agency. A Rwandan proverb, "You never know what is in a man's heart," used by the genocide survivor quoted at the beginning of this section, explains the fundamental problem of human agency and Rwandan secrecy practices. You can never truly know what another person thinks as he may be hiding his real thoughts and feelings from you. A genocide perpetrator called on the same proverb when explaining to me why he participated in the genocide. This man had confessed to killing numerous men, women, and children, and was said by others to have killed hundreds, had also hidden and protected some Tutsi women and children at his home. When I asked him why he decided to save some and kill others, he replied:

There was no decision. We were in a group of evildoers. They trained us [morally] to kill. We were together in a group. We watched what was happening, what others were doing. We don't all have the same heart. It's like the bus on the highway coming from Kigali going to Huye [motioning with his hands]. The bus comes and stops for you, you get on, and off you go.¹³

This man's response makes it clear that he did not feel as if he made a decision. Elsewhere in the interview, he explained that his mind was blank when he was killing. He compares the genocide to a bus that comes to town and carries people away. His description of his state of mind coincides with those documented by scholars who have found that mobs have an emergent agency that overrides individual will (see for example, Brass 1997; Tambiah 1996). His was the most chilling explanation of evil I have heard in Rwanda. If perpetrators did not make a choice to participate but instead killed without even thinking, then there is no way to prevent mob violence or to intervene to stop it.

Conclusion

A common element of these explanations of genocide's evil is explaining the unexplainable. The many violent acts that made up the genocide—and that Rwandans witnessed with their very own eyes or experienced with their bodies—were so far beyond the scope of the imaginable that they are inexplicable. While explaining genocidal violence as free-will run amuck fits best with Roman Catholic theology, many Rwandans prefer explanations that point to Satan, Satan's influence, demons, and evil spirits because they relieve, at least partially, human responsibility for evil. This perspective positions evil as a

¹³ Author's interview, Nyanza district, Rwanda, July 2013. Author's translation from the original Kinyarwanda and French.

thing that can be excised from a person's body, which fits with indigenous healing practices where healers remove abscesses, growths, or objects, understood to be poison implanted by a poisoner, from the bodies of the ill.

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