

1 Introduction: from colonies to Third World

On April 27, 1994, black South Africans, for the first times in their lives, voted in an election to decide who would govern their country. The lines at polling stations snaked around many blocks. It had been over thirty years since African political movements had been banned, and the leader of the strongest of them, Nelson Mandela, had spent twenty-seven of those years in prison. Most activists and observers inside and outside South Africa had thought that the “apartheid” regime, with its explicit policy promoting white supremacy, had become so deeply entrenched and its supporters so attached to their privileges that only a revolution would dislodge it. In a world that, some thirty to forty years earlier, had begun to tear down colonial empires and denounce governments which practiced racial segregation, South Africa had become a pariah, subject to boycotts of investment, travel, and trade. Now it was being redeemed, taking its place among nations which respected civil rights and democratic processes. This was indeed a revolution – whose final act was peaceful.

Three weeks earlier, a part of the vast press corps assembled to observe the electoral revolution in South Africa had been called away to report on another sort of event in another part of Africa. On April 6, what the press described as a “tribal bloodbath” began in Kigali, capital of Rwanda. It started when the plane carrying the country’s President, returning from a peace discussions in Arusha, Tanzania, was shot down. The government was dominated by people who called themselves “Hutu,” which most of the press assumed was a “tribe” that had long been engaged in rivalry and eventually civil war with another “tribe,” known as the “Tutsi.” Indeed, a significant number of Tutsi had fled from periodic massacres over the previous decades, and a group of exiles were invading Rwanda from neighboring Uganda to fight for a place for Tutsi in Rwandan government and society. The Tanzanian discussions were an attempt to resolve the conflict. But on the night of the plane crash there began the systematic slaughter of Tutsi by the Hutu-dominated army, by local militias, and apparently by angry mobs.

2 Africa since 1940: the past of the present

The killing spread throughout Rwanda, and it soon became clear that this was more than an outburst of hatred; it was an attempt to destroy the entire Tutsi population, from babies to elders. When it ended, some months later, around 700,000 Tutsi had died, a large portion of the Tutsi population, as had numerous Hutu who had opposed the genocidal leaders. It only ended because the Hutu-dominated army, deeply involved in the genocide, became too demoralized to fight the invading army, which captured Kigali and moved to take control over the rest of the territory. The “Tutsi” military victory now produced a wave of “Hutu” refugees into neighboring Zaire. By the fall of 1994, many of the soldiers, militiamen, and thugs responsible for the genocide had joined fleeing children, women, and men in the refugee camps. The genocidal militias were intimidating other refugees into participating in raids on Rwanda. Violence would soon envelop the much larger country of Zaire as well.

The past of the present

At first glance, these two events of April 1994 seem like opposites, as Africa’s two possible fates – either dissolving into “tribal” or “ethnic” violence or uniting under a liberal democratic system. Certainly that is how newspapers and other media in the United States and western Europe portrayed the events at the time. Looked at as a snapshot, in April 1994, such a perspective is understandable. But if one looks to earlier periods in time, what happened in South Africa and Rwanda becomes more complicated, less easily decipherable. That South Africa has come to be governed by institutions familiar in the west – an elected parliament and a system of courts – does not mean that those institutions function in the same way as they do in western Europe or North America or that people do not form other kinds of affiliations, view their lives through other kinds of lenses, and imagine their society through categories distinct from those of the west. Nor is it helpful to think of the Rwandan catastrophe as the result of the age-old division of Africa into neatly separate cultures, each a distinctive and exclusive community with a long history of conflict with people who are “different,” unable to function within western-style institutions because such institutions do not fit the reality of Africa. History does not inevitably lead all peoples of the world to “rise” to western political forms, or to “fall” into tribal bloodbaths.

This book explores the period when the rule of European colonial powers over most of the African continent began to fall apart, when Africans mobilized to claim new futures, when the day-to-day realities of life in cities and villages changed rapidly, and when new states had to come to grips with the meaning of sovereignty and the limits of state power faced

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From colonies to Third World

3



1 South Africa's first non-racial election, April 1994. A poster of Nelson Mandela, candidate of the ANC, behind a military vehicle – of the type typically used to control “township violence” – in the black township of Rammulotsi.



2 Genocide and looting, Rwanda, April 11, 1994. A looter removes a bedframe from a house whose murdered inhabitants lie on the ground behind him, Kigali, Rwanda.

4 Africa since 1940: the past of the present

with the social realities within their borders and their even less controllable position in the world economy and global power relations. It is a book about possibilities which people made for themselves as members of rural communities, as migrants to cities and as the builders of social organizations, political movements, and new forms of cultural expression. It is also about the ways many of those openings closed down.

This book cuts across the conventional dividing point between colonial and post-colonial African history, a division which conceals as much as it reveals. Focusing on such a dividing point either makes the break seem too neat – as if colonialism was turned off like a light switch – or suggests too much continuity, positing continued western dominance of the world economy and the continued presence in African states of “western” institutions as a mere change of personnel within a structure of power that remains colonial. We do not have to make a dichotomous choice between continuity or change. Indeed, the institutions of colonial states, from crop marketing to law courts, did not operate as their designers intended, but were being appropriated, contested, and transformed even while European flags still flew over colonial capitals. Acquiring formal sovereignty was an important element in the historical dynamics of the last half-century, but not the only one. Family life and religious expression also changed substantially in Africa, but not necessarily in rhythm with changes in political organization.

Most important, one needs to understand how the cracks that appeared in the edifice of colonial power after World War II gave a wide range of people – wage laborers, peasants, students, traders, and educated professionals – a chance to articulate their aspirations, be they the hope of having clean, piped water in a rural village or of taking an honorable place in global political institutions. A distinguished Ghanaian historian, Adu Boahen, begins an article about the 1950s by writing “It was certainly great to be alive in those days . . .” – a phrase which conveys not only the excitement of being part of a generation that could shape its own future but also a sense that “those days” were better than the ones which followed.

The colonial state that failed in the 1950s was colonialism at its most intrusively ambitious, and the independent states that took over had to take over the failure of colonial development as well: even if the mineral and agricultural production of Africa had increased in the post-war years, the African farmer and worker had not become the predictable and orderly producer officials dreamed of. New African governments inherited both the narrow, export-oriented infrastructure which developmentalist colonialism had not yet transcended and the limited markets for producers of raw material which the post-war boom in the global economy had

only temporarily improved. But now they had to pay for the increasingly ponderous administrative structure that 1950s colonial development had put in place and, more important, to meet the heightened expectations of people who now hoped that the state might really be theirs.

The historical sequence outlined in the first chapters of this book brought into being states that had all the trappings recognized around the world as “sovereignty.” But the particular characteristics of those states were consequences of the sequence, not merely the sovereignty. Colonial states had been gatekeeper states. They had weak instruments for entering into the social and cultural realm over which they presided, but they stood astride the intersection of the colonial territory and the outside world. Their main source of revenue was duties on goods that entered and left its ports; they could decide who could leave for education and what kinds of educational institutions could come in; they established rules and licenses that defined who could engage in internal and external commerce. Africans tried to build networks that got around the state’s control over access to the outside world and to build economic and social networks inside the territory which were beyond the state’s reach. In the 1940s and 1950s, the formal channels of access to officially recognized economic channels, both inside and outside, seemed to be opening wider to Africans. Social, political, and cultural associational life within African territories became richer and links with outside organizations more diverse. The gate was becoming wider, but only so far.

The development effort of late colonial regimes never did provide the basis for a strong national economy; economies remained externally oriented and the state’s economic power remained concentrated at the gate between inside and outside. Meanwhile, African leaders’ own experience of mobilization *against* the state gave them an acute sense of how vulnerable the power they had inherited was. The mixed success of colonial and post-colonial development efforts did not give leaders the confidence that economic development would lead to a generalized prosperity for which they could get credit and flourishing domestic activity which would provide government revenue. Most rulers realized early on that their own interests were served by the same strategy of gatekeeping that had served the colonial state before World War II: limited channels for advancement that officials controlled were less risky than broad ones which could become nuclei for opposition. But the post-colonial gatekeeper state, lacking the external coercive capacity of its predecessor, was a vulnerable state, not a strong one. The stakes of controlling the gate were so high that various groups tried to grab it – officers or noncommissioned officers in the army, regional power brokers. A regime not so dependent on gate-keeping benefits from the fact that its opponents can afford to lose; they

6 Africa since 1940: the past of the present

have other avenues for wealth and other loci for power. Gatekeeper states are in danger for the simple reason that rulers temporarily in control of the gate want to stay there. Hence ruling elites tended to use patronage, coercion, scapegoating of opponents, and other resources to reinforce their position, narrowing the channels of access even further. By looking at the post-war era as a whole, one can begin to explain the succession of crises that colonial and postcolonial states faced, without getting into a sterile debate over whether a colonial “legacy” or the incompetence of African governments is to blame. Africa’s present did not emerge from an abrupt proclamation of independence, but from a long, convoluted, and still ongoing process.

When understood in time perspective, the two stories of April 1994 illustrate the openings and possibilities and the closures and dangers of politics in Africa during the last half-century. Let us start to look backward at the history behind the more painful of the two, Rwanda. The murderous violence that erupted on April 6 was not a spontaneous outburst of ancient hatreds; it was planned. It was prepared by a modern institution, a government with its bureaucratic and military apparatus, using modern means of communications and modern forms of propaganda. The hatred in Rwanda was real enough, but it was hatred with a history, not a natural attribute of cultural difference. Indeed, cultural difference in Rwanda was relatively minimal: Hutu and Tutsi speak the same language; most are Catholic. Rwandans and westerners often think that there are ideal physical features of each group – Tutsi tall and slender, Hutu short and broad. But in fact appearance poorly distinguishes them.

Indeed, one of the horrifying features of the genocide was that militias, unable to tell a Tutsi when they saw one, demanded that people produce identification cards that listed their ethnic group and then killed people who were labeled Tutsi or who refused to produce a card. In the years before the mass killings, a shadowy organization of elite Hutu, connected to the government leaders, had systematically organized a propaganda campaign – especially over the radio – against Tutsi. Apparently, many Hutu still had to be convinced that there was a Tutsi conspiracy against them, and social pressure had to be carefully organized, village by village, to bring people into line. Thousands of Hutu did not accept this, and when the genocide began Hutu judged to be overly sympathetic to Tutsi were themselves frequently killed, while other Hutu acted with courage to save Tutsi neighbors.

One has to push back further. There was a “Tutsi” threat – to the government, at least. It had its origins in earlier violence. In 1959 and again the early 1970s, there were pogroms against Tutsi which caused

thousands of them to flee to Uganda. Some of them became allies of the Ugandan rebel leader Yoweri Museveni, as he worked in the 1980s to take over a state submerged in the chaos left by the dictatorship of Idi Amin Dada and his brutal successors. President Museveni was grateful for their assistance, but eager that they go home. The Rwandan Patriotic Army trained in Uganda, attacked Rwanda in 1990, and attacked more vigorously in 1993; whether their objective was to take over Rwanda or to be reintegrated into “their” country was in dispute. In 1994, mediators from inside and outside Africa tried to settle the conflict and devise a power-sharing arrangement that would provide security to both Hutu and Tutsi. That was why President Habyarimana took his fatal flight in April: he had attended discussions aimed at resolving the conflict. He may have been killed by “Hutu Power” extremists for fear that he would compromise and in order to provoke an already-planned slaughter. Within hours of the crash, the hunt for Tutsi had engulfed the capital, and it soon spread. Whenever local people and local officials weren’t enthusiastic enough in their bloody endeavor, the Rwandan army stepped in to run the killing machine.

We need to push back further. The radio campaign did not build up hatred from nothing. Rwanda had been a Belgian colony since 1918, having been originally colonized by Germany at the end of the nineteenth century, then turned over to Belgium after Germany lost World War I. Belgian officials conceived of Tutsi as natural aristocrats, as less “African” than the Hutu. Only Tutsi were accepted as chiefs under colonial supervision; missionaries were more likely to welcome them into schools and convert them to Catholicism. Belgian officials decided that they needed to know who *was* Tutsi and Hutu, and so they classified people into one or the other and made them carry identification cards. It took work to turn difference and inequality into group boundaries, into ethnicity.

We can push back still further. German and Belgian understanding of Rwandan history was inaccurate, but it was not made up out of whole cloth. Rwanda, like other kingdoms in the Great Lakes of East Africa, was highly differentiated. There was much movement of peoples in Rwanda’s fertile hills and a blending of people who lived by hunting and gathering, by keeping cattle, and by agriculture. Some, largely European, versions of Rwandan history have Tutsi pastoralists migrating as a people from the north and conquering agricultural peoples, but there is little evidence to support such a story. More likely, a variety of migratory streams intersected and overlapped, and as particular kinship groups claimed power, they developed their myths of origin and historical narratives to justify their power. Rather than a history of conflict following from the fact of distinction, social distinctions were a product of a complex history.

Several kingdoms developed in the area. Most royal families were Tutsi – although most Tutsi were not rulers – but royal men married women who were both Tutsi and Hutu, so that genetically the categories meant less and less, if they ever meant much at all. Wealthy people owned cattle, and the wealthiest claimed to be Tutsi, but many Hutu became cattle owners and many of them began to think of themselves and be accepted as Tutsi. The nearest English word to describe what Tutsi meant in pre-European Rwanda is “aristocracy” – but it was an aristocracy linked to ordinary people via marriage, cattle-exchange, and a common way of life. This does not mean it was an egalitarian society; the difference between owning many cattle and owning few was important. Nor was it a peaceful society. Violent conflict, however, rarely pit Tutsi against Hutu, but took place between rival kingdoms each of which consisted of both Tutsi and Hutu.

If we look back far enough, then, we see that “difference” is part of the story that led to April 1994, but we do not find a long history of “the Tutsi” in conflict with “the Hutu.” Interaction *and* differentiation are both important. When did polarization become acute? The answer appears to be, in the 1950s, as the political structures of the colonial era unravelled. Belgian favoritism toward Tutsi, and particularly Tutsi chiefs, was increasingly complicated when Belgium began to be challenged on its own terms by Rwandans who had a western education, who were Christian, and who were asking why they should be excluded from a voice in their own affairs. Because schools had discriminated in favor of Tutsi, the anti-colonial movement began among people so classified. Belgium, and also the Catholic Church, began to favor Hutu, who were now alleged to represent an “authentic Africa” against the pretentious Tutsi. In 1957, a “Hutu Manifesto” accused Tutsi of monopolizing power, land, and education. The riots of 1959 were part an uprising of peasants with genuine grievances – who were most likely to be Hutu – and part ethnic pogrom. Belgium did little to prepare a peaceful transfer of political institutions into the hands of Africans. But French and British colonies were moving rapidly toward self-government and independence, and Belgium could not escape the trends – a topic which will be the focus of much of this book.

The independence of Rwanda in 1962 was for most Rwandans an eagerly sought moment of liberation from colonial rule. But many Tutsi feared that they would now become a minority group, in danger from a resentful Hutu majority, whose representatives had won the first elections. Many Hutu, on the other hand, feared that Tutsi were conspiring to keep by devious methods that which they could not retain through free elections. The pogroms and the elections chased Tutsi leaders from the political scene and created the first wave of Tutsi exiles.

The ensuing Rwandan regime, like many others in Africa, was highly clientelistic and focused on delivering state-controlled assets to supporters. Like other regimes of that era, it was ineffective and insecure, and it was thrown out in 1973 in a military coup led by Juvenal Habyarimana, who would remain in power until his murder twenty-one years later. This regime proved to be as corrupt and ineffectual as its predecessor, but it received considerable support from France and other donors. When export crop prices fell and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) made the government tighten its belt in the 1980s, government supporters felt they were not getting the spoils they deserved. Some groups tried to organize opposition, but Hutu extremists linked to Habyarimana scapegoated Tutsi and worked harder to exclude them from Rwandan society. Then came the invasion of a Tutsi refugee army in 1990, itself the consequence of past waves of killings and expulsions of Tutsi. The government army (aided by France) grew in response, and Hutu extremists instigated killings, organized local militias, and generated anti-Tutsi propaganda. International organizations tried in 1993 to engineer a peace settlement. Whereas some Hutu leaders, perhaps including Habyarimana himself, entered negotiations hoping that power sharing would ease a desperate situation, others were thinking of another, final, solution.

In the neighboring Belgian colony of Burundi, a similar power struggle within a similar social structure had taken place, but there it was a Tutsi minority who emerged on top. Large-scale killings occurred in Burundi, and there it was Hutu who were the main victims and who often became refugees. In both cases, the decolonization process brought to power governments that were insecure and anxious: in Rwanda led by a section of Hutu, in Burundi by a section of Tutsi. In both cases, oppressive government action and widespread anxiety were cross-cut by often close relationships across the Tutsi–Hutu divide and by uncertainty over who, exactly, was a Tutsi and who a Hutu. In the months before April 1994, the sowers of hatred still had work to do.

I have begun by looking back, step by step, to see the layers of historical complexity leading up to the events of 1994. We began with what might look simple (and did to most foreign journalists) – a tribal bloodbath, old hatreds coming to the surface. We have found something more complicated: a history of interaction as much as of distinction, and a murderous trajectory that was less a burst of ethnic enmity than a genocide organized by a ruling clique.

Let us look back into South African history, briefly now, but in more detail in chapter 6. One can trace the peaceful revolution of 1994 back to the founding of the African National Congress (ANC) in 1912 and find a durable thread: the belief that multiracial democracy was the ideal polity

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10 Africa since 1940: the past of the present

for South Africa. But the negotiated end of white power emerged not just from principled, democratic opposition, but also from a wave of violence that neither the ANC nor other African political groups could control, notably from the mid-1980s to the very eve of the 1994 election, as well as from a range of political movements, not all of which fit the liberal democratic mold. The white regime also turns out to be more complicated than simply die-hard racists from a by-gone era. The apartheid regime was pragmatic and sophisticated, and in the era when late colonial and independent governments elsewhere in Africa were striving – with mixed results – to achieve “development,” it presided over the most thorough industrialization of any African economy, producing great wealth and a European standard of living for its white population. These South African pasts will not easily be consigned to history, for the linkage of wealth for some to the impoverishment of many remains very much a part of post-1994 South Africa, even if a portion of the once-excluded African population is now in a position of authority and affluence.

In 1940, segregation, denial of political voice, and economic disenfranchisement did not distinguish South Africa from colonial Africa. But in the 1960s, South Africa had become a pariah in much of the world. It took a great deal of political and ideological labor to make colonial domination appear abnormal and unacceptable to people who did not live under its yoke, and it was this process which began the isolation of South Africa’s white regime. After 1994, the social and economic inequalities of South African society appear all too normal, and the question of whether the extremes of poverty and inequality throughout Africa will become a burning, world-wide concern, as did colonialism and apartheid, remains open.

Nothing in South Africa’s past determined that it would one day be governed by a non-racialist, democratically elected party. When the ANC was founded in 1912, its program of peaceful protest, petition, and the evocation of democratic principles was one of several ways in which Africans expressed themselves. Alongside this liberal constitutionalist conception of freedom was a Christian one, profoundly influenced by a century of missionary activity, and part of that tendency, influenced by African-American missionaries, linked Christianity to racial unity and redemption. Others operated within the frameworks of Xhosa, Zulu, and other ethnicity-based African political units seeking, for example, to mobilize behind a chief who would represent the solidarity of what people perceived to be their community. By the 1920s, the back-to-Africa politics of Jamaican-born, US-based Marcus Garvey linked South Africa to a Black Atlantic world via black sailors who stopped in South African ports, while other versions of Pan-Africanism came out of educational and cultural