The Manipulation of ‘Sanctuary’ in Catholic Churches During the Rwandan Genocide

Figure 1: Church massacre at Nyarubuye during the Rwandan genocide.

According to the United Nations Genocide Prevention Office, genocide encompasses “acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical or religious group”. The Rwandan genocide of 1994, marked the murder of 800,000 Tutsi by members of the Hutu majority. The mass atrocity claimed over 80% of the Tutsi population as a result of the ethnic tensions created by racialized ideals of European settlers during the colonial period. During the Rwandan genocide, Catholic churches became traps where thousands of Tutsis seeking refuge were slaughtered. The symbolic function of churches as sanctuaries was violated to represent places of violence. Subsequently, some of the churches involved later became memorial sites commemorating the genocide. Thus, further transforming the way in which churches are perceived. Before examining the role of Catholic churches in the Rwandan genocide, it is necessary to understand the impact of colonization and religious influence on Rwandan society.

**Historical Context - Colonization**

To begin, the origin of the terms *Hutu, Tutsi and Twa* existed as early as the first century and represented the different groups of people who occupied Rwanda. The Twa were indigenous to the country and were later displaced by the Hutu. In the fifteenth century, Tutsi descendants from the southern Ethiopian highlands conquered Rwanda. At the time, the Tutsi maintained a monarchy with a Mwami, a king of “divine origin”, as leader. The Hutu,

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who were cultivators, and the Tutsi, who were pastoralists, came to an agreement exchanging Hutu services to the Tutsi for cattle and land.\textsuperscript{8} With respect to pre-colonial narratives, some suggest ethnic disharmony always existed amongst the Hutu and Tutsi. Others suggest that Rwanda was a united country and the Tutsi and Hutu lived in harmony together.\textsuperscript{9} The names Hutu, Tutsi and Twa existed in pre-colonial times but were exacerbated by German and Belgian settlers in order to racially divide the Rwandan people.\textsuperscript{10} 

Furthermore, tensions between the Hutu and Tutsi were intensified by the racist beliefs of colonizers. Primarily, the Germans had established a colonial administration in Rwanda in the 1890s.\textsuperscript{11} Thereafter, Rwanda became a Belgian trusteeship after World War I, along with the neighbouring Burundi.\textsuperscript{12} The German and Belgian colonizers had regarded the Tutsi as superior to the Hutu based on the racist ideals that stated Tutsis appeared to be more “white” than Hutus. However, this racial preference had become more prevalent during Belgian rule and led to the oppression of the Hutus. The Belgian colonizers began to alter the Rwandan government, appointing Tutsi alone to significant political positions and removing Hutus from positions of authority and higher education.\textsuperscript{13} In 1935, in order to fortify control Belgian colonists introduced identity cards that classified Hutu, Tutsi and Twa.\textsuperscript{14} The impact of colonization was an important factor in the implementation of racial categorization amongst Rwandan people. Concurrently, the arrival of Catholic missionaries in 1900 further emphasized ethnic tensions that ultimately contributed to the genocide.\textsuperscript{15}

**Historical Context - Catholic Missionaries**

\textsuperscript{8} Galloway, Erin. \textit{op. cit.} 
\textsuperscript{10} Ibid. 

In the mid 1800s, during the Industrial revolution in Europe, many Western European colonizers invaded African countries in order to establish colonies. The Berlin Conference in 1884 was held in order to distribute power among the fourteen European countries involved. 
\textsuperscript{12} History.com Editors. \textit{op. cit.} 
\textsuperscript{14} Hymowitz, Sarah and Amelia Parker. \textit{op.cit.} 
\textsuperscript{15} “Leave None to Tell the Story: Genocide in Rwanda.” \textit{op. cit.} 

The first European mission stations in Rwanda were established in 1900 by the Society of Our Lady of Africa, commonly known as the White Fathers.
The Belgian colonizers authorized the creation of two exclusive political parties. One being the Union for National Progress (UPRONA) led by Tutsi President Louis Rwagore and the other being the Christian Democratic Party (PDC).\(^{16}\) Thus, the Catholic missionaries formed an alliance with the government and worked in conjunction with the Belgian administration to maintain power. The missionaries focused their efforts on converting political authorities first in order to ascertain Christian rule.\(^{17}\) In general, Christianity promoted obedience to government authority. Thus, religion was exploited as a means to solidify the colonial administration of the Belgians.\(^{18}\) In order to establish Catholicism in Rwanda, the Belgian and Christian missionaries deposed King Yuhi V. Musinga\(^{19}\), who frequently opposed the church, and appointed his son, the pro-Catholic Mutara III Rudahigwa. Under the influence of the head of the Catholic Church in Rwanda, Rudahigwa designated Rwanda as a Christian state.\(^{20}\) In the following decades many Rwandans followed the example of their leader and converted to Christianity.\(^{21}\) Ultimately, the Belgian colonizers, with the support of the Catholic missionaries, were successful in implementing a system of indirect rule through the conversion of Rwandans to Christianity.

Consequently, an influx of new missionaries attempted to erase the racial prejudices, created by former missionaries, against the Hutu by providing opportunities for education and employment. The new missionaries sought to provide opportunities for education and employment for the Hutus and raised awareness of their mistreatment. This resulted in animosity toward the Tutsi who were favored by the Belgian colonists and previous Catholic missionaries.\(^{22}\) In addition, the Tutsis in power sought for more independence and began resenting the colonial rule of the Belgians.\(^{23}\) Thus, in order to take authority away from the Tutsi, the Belgian administration switched allegiance from Tutsi to Hutu and replaced Tutsi

\(^{16}\) Galloway, Erin. *op. cit.*
\(^{17}\) “Leave None to Tell the Story: Genocide in Rwanda.” *op. cit.*
\(^{21}\) Linden, Ian. *op. cit.*
\(^{22}\) Longman, Timothy. *op. cit.*
\(^{23}\) Hymowitz, Sarah and Amelia Parker. *op. cit.*
chiefs and officials with Hutus. As a result of their newfound political authority and consciousness of their plight, Hutu mobs attacked Tutsi chiefs and officials, forcing 330,000 Tutsi to flee the country. The Hutus managed to overthrow Tutsi rule and formed an independent republic, which was run by the first Hutu president, Greg Wa Kayabanda.

**Genocide** (doesn’t make sense as a title in a paper on the subject)

When Independence was granted by Belgium in July of 1961, the Rwandan government was primarily dominated by Hutus. The National Revolutionary Movement for Development (NRMD) was created in order to monitor and regulate the population. The NRMD was Rwanda’s sole political party from 1975-1994, led by a moderate Hutu, President Major General Juvenal Habyarimana. All citizens were required to become members of the NRMD and pay party dues. Churches were among the only organizations that remained outside of the party’s control and the archbishop, Vincent Nsengiyumwa, of the Rwandan Catholic Church held a seat on the central committee of the NRMD. The regime created years of oppression against the Tutsi and many were killed during this time. After Independence was granted many Hutu were trained to kill Tutsi. The Hutus who committed murder were left unpunished and the government figures who incited the killings were rewarded with promotion.

In an attempt to overthrow the NRMD regime, forces of the Rwandese Patriotic Front (RPF), consisting mostly of Tutsi refugees, invaded Rwanda from Uganda. As a result, hundreds of Tutsi residents were accused of being RPF accomplices and arrested. Between

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24 History.com Editors. *op. cit.*
25 Hymowitz, Sarah and Amelia Parker. *op.cit.*
26 History.com Editors. *op.cit.*
27 Ibid.
29 History.com Editors. *op. cit.*
30 Linden, Ian. *op.cit.* 139-160.
1990 and 1993, elevated policies and propaganda against Tutsis led to government directed massacres. At this time, the Coalition for the Defence of the Republic (CDR) was created by Hutu extremists espousing anti-Tutsi rhetoric and the NRMD also transformed its youth wing, the Interahamwe, into a militia. In an attempt to halt the violence, President Habyarimana signed an agreement calling for the creation of a government that would include the RPF in August of 1993. However, this angered Hutu extremists, who later took action to ensure the exclusion of the RPF opposition in the government.

On April 6, 1994, a plane carrying President Habyarimana and Burundi’s President Cyprien Ntaryamira was shot down over the capital city of Kigali. The culprit remains unknown but some have blamed Hutu extremists, while others blamed leaders of the RPF. The assassination provided Hutu extremists in the NRMD an opportunity to break the peace agreement and commence the genocide. Within an hour of the plane crash, the NRMD immediately initiated a campaign of retribution, killing leaders of the political opposition (the RPF) in an attempt to remain the sole party in power. Members of the national army of Rwanda and Hutu militia groups began slaughtering Tutsis. Intensified government sponsored propaganda against the Tutsi called on ordinary Rwandan civilians to murder their Tutsi neighbors. Officials rewarded killers with food, drink, drugs and money. Within three months, 800,000 people had been slaughtered.

Analyzing the manipulation of the symbolic function of Rwandan Catholic Churches

Religion was an essential element that was complicit to the violence that occurred in the Rwandan genocide. Specifically, the genocide in Rwanda was indirectly caused by the implantation of Christianity by Belgian colonizers and Catholic missionaries. More people were killed in church buildings than any other location. Local (Hutu and moderate Tutsi)

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33 Linden, Ian. *op.cit.* 139-160.
35 “Rwanda: How the Genocide Happened.” *op. cit.*
36 Ephgrave, Nicole M. *op.cit.* 21-32.
37 History.com Editors. *op.cit.*
39 History.com Editors. *op.cit.*
politicians encouraged Tutsi to gather in central locations, usually a church, ostensibly for their security, only to be massacred. In addition, similarly to the political authorities that commenced the genocide in order to assert authority, members of the Rwandan Catholic Church accepted the genocide as means to remain in control within the churches. By 1991, a significant portion of the Rwandan population claimed membership in a Christian church. In addition, many Rwandans had sought refuge in the various churches in Rwanda during previous outbreaks of violence and found safety. Thus, most of the Rwandan population had already established trust in churches and regarded them as places of devotion and safety. However, the notion of sanctuary was transgressed during the genocide and people who sought refuge in church buildings were deceived into being murdered there instead.

**Sainte - Famille Parish: Kijali**

The Sainte - Famille Church is a specific example where the head priest, Wenceslas Munyeshyaka, repeatedly participated in the selection of Tutsi refugees to be murdered. The church where many Tutsi sought refuge is positioned on a hill overlooking the capital city of Kigali. The Parish was regarded as one of the most sacred and safe places in Rwanda as it was the largest Catholic Church in Kigali. Thus, over 2000 Tutsi had sought shelter in the

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44 Ephgrave, Nicole M. *op. cit.* 21-32.
Church expecting protection. Instead, many were handed over to Hutu militia to be killed.\textsuperscript{47} Thus, the symbolic and sacred function of the Sainte-Famille Church was violated during the genocide.

Since most of the killings happened in Catholic churches, this occurrence forever alters the perception of the individual churches in Rwanda and the Catholic Church as an institution. Churches are typically regarded as places that are devoid of danger and evil. However, even in places representing safety, refuge and the divine, horrific violence occurred. Thus, destroying the reputation of the specific church and the inviolability associated with religious architecture. In addition, some Hutu extremists attended church the day before killing and even stopped at the altar to pray before murdering individuals.\textsuperscript{48}

Moreover, many Hutu in Rwanda had come to believe that the elimination of the Tutsi was necessary in order to achieve salvation and to end their poverty.\textsuperscript{49} These actions portray a transgression against the religious ideals associated with places of devotion and are in opposition to Catholic values. Furthermore, deviously influencing the Tutsi to seek refuge in churches degrades the notion of asylum with regards to the function of a church. The degradation of architectural function, specifically symbolic significance was present during the genocide.

\textsuperscript{47} Jura, Jackie. \textit{op. cit.}


\textsuperscript{49} Ephgrave, Nicole M. \textit{op. cit.}
Nyange Church in the Diocese of Nyundo

Figure 4: The Nyange Church before destruction.50

The physical damage inflicted upon the various churches serves as an analogy to the violence that occurred in Rwanda during the Tutsi genocide. An example is in the Nyange Church in the Diocese of Nyundo. The Kibuye prefecture in Western Rwanda was targeted by Hutu militia with the help of the head priest, Athanase Seromba. The priest encouraged Tutsi to seek refuge in the church and later worked with Hutu extremists to throw grenades through the church’s windows, maiming and killing hundreds of people.51 The church was bulldozed and resulted in the deaths of 2000 Tutsi, after earlier attempts to burn the church had failed. Thus, the destruction of the church caused the deaths of the inhabitants inside.52

Ntarama Church

Figure 5: The structure of the Ntarama Church remained and was later reinforced by a steel roof in order to be utilized as a memorial centre.\(^{53}\)

Many other churches were destroyed with grenades and riddled with bullet holes, like the Ntarama Church (located in Bugesera, about 30km from the capital city of Kigali) where grenades were thrown killing 5000 people.\(^{54}\) The structure of the Church remained, however the sacredness of the building was defiled by the atrocity that occurred in the Church. The site is now a memorial where the skulls and bones of the victims are displayed. Thus, the function of the church as a place of worship was altered and changed into a place of commemoration due to the horrific events that occurred there.\(^{55}\) The place where many had once sought refuge became a deathtrap and misled many. The genocide that occurred in the Ntarama Church contaminated the architecture, thus altering the function. Therefore, altering the concept of sanctuary in Rwandan churches to represent murder and genocide.

Commemoration


\(^{54}\) History.com Editors. *op. cit.*

By July 1994, RPF forces had gained control over Rwanda. A Hutu, Pasteur Bizimungu became president and a Tutsi, Paul Kagame was the vice president and defense minister. This unified government of both Hutu and Tutsi created a ruling coalition. At this time, two million people, almost all Hutus, fled Rwanda, crowding in refugee camps in the Congo (then called Zaire) and other neighbouring countries. In 2003, the NRMD party, which participated in the organization of the genocide, was eliminated and reference to ethnicity was removed. This new constitution led to Rwanda’s first legislative elections where Paul Kagame was elected to a ten-year term as Rwanda’s president.

Currently in Rwanda, genocide memorial sites serve to remind the living to never allow such terrible events and crimes to occur again. However, for some survivors of the genocide, the country’s remaining churches serve as a reminder of the genocide that took the lives of their friends and family. The memory of the violence that occurred in specific Rwandan churches cannot be erased and the churches involved will always be associated with the genocide that occurred in Rwanda. There are ten government-sponsored sites in the form of cemeteries, museums, libraries and churches (see figure 6).

Figure 6: Here is a map depicting where Rwanda’s memorial sites are located. The Ntarama, Nyamata, and Nyarubuye memorials functioned as Catholic churches in Rwanda before the genocide.

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56 Ephgrave, Nicole M. *op.cit.* 21-32.
57 History.com Editors. *op. cit.*
58 Ibid.
59 Ibid.
60 Blair, S. Lucke and John A. Stevenson. *op. cit.*
62 Blair, S. Lucke and John A. Stevenson. *op. cit.*
63 Ephgrave, Nicole M. *op.cit.* 33.
The memorials in Rwanda commemorating the genocide are state sponsored by the RPF government. The RPF is a single party regime, primarily managed by members of the Tutsi ethnic minority. The violent imagery associated with the memorials validates the governance of the RPF because the sites criminalize Hutus and indicate that Rwandan Catholic churches were compliant in the genocide. In turn, the RPF relies on the sites to evoke the genocide and guilt that brought the party to power. Specifically, the ruins of the Catholic churches are used to evoke a strong message relating to the violence that occurred. At the Nyamata Church, 50,000 people were killed and skulls and bones are now displayed with the clothing of victims (see figure 7-8). The violent imagery in these churches can be interpreted as the manipulation of memory to publicize the RPF’s representation of the genocide. Thus, implicating the Hutu opposition as being responsible for the Rwandan genocide. The RPF’s objective to remain in power is promoted by the notion that salvation can only be established by the rule of a primarily Tutsi government. Thus, the memorials support the governance of the RPF.

In addition, bones displayed in memorials can be interpreted to depict the violence and genocide more than the victim’s lives. This graphic form of remembrance can be perceived as the dehumanization of the victims and instead the remnants become part of the architecture representing the genocide. Specific sites, such as the Ntarama Church, Nyarubuye Church, and Nyamata Church are advertised as “attractions” for tourists to visit.

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64 Blair, S. Lucke and John A. Stevenson. *op. cit.*
65 Ibid.
66 Ibid.
67 Gwin, Peter. *op. cit.*
68 Ibid.
69 Blair, S. Lucke and John A. Stevenson. *op. cit.*
70 “Rwanda Genocide Memorials.” Rwanda Safaris Rwanda Genocide Memorials Comments.
The memorials address the tragic Rwandan past but do not reflect all the individual lives taken during the genocide. The mass memorial graves and displays in Rwanda collectively group all the victims of the genocide, relegating them to anonymity. Therefore, the display of various human remains in particular Rwandan churches place emphasis on the genocide rather than the lives of victims. This form of memorialization manipulates the architectural function of churches in order to present powerful imagery to depict the genocide in a manner that supports the reign of the RPF. Furthermore, during colonization endorsing religion was used as a way to maintain power.

During colonization the Belgium administration and Catholic missionaries exploited Catholic conversion in order to gain control. Similarly, through the creation of state-sponsored memorials, the RPF promotes its governance through the evocative representation of the genocide in Catholic churches. The discourse created by the RPF through the memorialization of some Rwandan Catholic churches is analogous to the Belgian ideology of ensuring compliancy through promoting Catholicism. Thus, Catholic ideologies and religious architecture associated with the Catholic religion were exploited by both the Belgian and RPF administrations. The RPF as an institution and not the Catholic Church as an institution, possess the capacity to be a moral voice in Rwanda. However, Catholic churches are used by the RPF to evoke powerful imagery that creates guilt through the displays of bones and destruction. Thus, the RPF implements political influence through the memorialization of Catholic churches.

In conclusion, the Catholic churches involved in the Rwandan genocide of 1994, were used to insure political authority. Religious architecture embodies symbolic value. However, the sacredness of churches in Rwanda was tragically exploited to enable genocide. In other words, the Catholic churches involved in the Rwandan genocide represented the exacerbated ethnic tension created by Belgian and Catholic missionaries that ultimately led to the mass killings. Additionally, the memorialization of Catholic churches depicts the genocide in a way that legitimizes the RPF. Thus, through the influence of Catholicism by the Belgian administration, Catholic architecture was conceived. Consequently, the betrayal of architectural function was present not only during the genocide, but also during the Belgian colonization.

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71 Blair, S. Lucke and John A. Stevenson. *op. cit.*
colonial administration and afterwards by the RPF in the form of commemorative manipulation. Catholic churches represent the violence that occurred during the Rwandan genocide. Ultimately, the influence of religion and sacred architecture in Rwanda promoted the rule of colonizers and currently supports the RPF regime.
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