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Commentary

Identity, history, and education in Rwanda: Reflections on the 2014 Nobel Peace Prize



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On December 10, 2014, the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded in Oslo, Norway, to Kailash Satyarthi and Malala Yousafzai “for their struggle against the suppression of children and young people and for the right of all children to education” ([Nobel Media AB, 2014](#)). Satyarthi, who lives in New Delhi, India, has a long record as an international activist for the rights of children and youth. Yousafzai was already known to the world as Malala, the Pakistani girl who was shot in the head by the Taliban for her support of education for girls ([Yousafzai, 2013](#)).

Then, life went on. Within a week the Pakistani Taliban attacked a school in Peshawar, Pakistan. They killed more than 140 individuals, including more than 130 schoolchildren.

In a recent study, Elisabeth [King \(2014\)](#) analyzed education in Rwanda over the past century. Rwanda is of course quite different from Pakistan. But in Rwanda, as in Pakistan, India, and everywhere else, complex histories and identities figure prominently in education and violence ([Moshman, 2004, 2009, 2011](#)). In recognition of the 2014 Peace Prize focus on children, youth, and education, I provide here an overview of King’s illuminating book, which has implications far beyond Rwanda. But first, a brief general history.

A brief history of Rwanda

The story of Rwanda, like that of any society, is in large part a history of identities ([Moshman, 2004](#)). The borders of most African countries are the rather arbitrary aftermath of European colonialism. Rwanda, in contrast, was a nation prior to colonization. Rwandans were first and foremost Rwandan. Although a distinction was made between Hutu and Tutsi, these were neither tribes nor ethnic groups. Rather, the distinction between Hutu and Tutsi was a fluid one, based on a combination of ancestry and socioeconomic status, including the ownership of cattle. Rwanda was a single society in which Hutu and Tutsi lived among each other, spoke the same language, shared religious beliefs, and intermarried. The Tutsi, comprising 15% of the population, were politically and economically dominant. Nevertheless, some Hutu attained some degree of power and economic success, and many Tutsi were as poor and marginalized as the majority of Hutu.

From the 1890s to the early 1960s, Germany and then Belgium reinforced Tutsi power as a means of controlling the country. Identity cards distinguishing Hutu from Tutsi became mandatory, thus requiring everyone to be categorized and making these categories official.

Rwanda became independent in the early 1960s with its Hutu majority, for the first time, in control. Many Hutu saw their attainment of power as a democratic victory after centuries of illegitimate domination by the Tutsi minority. Many Tutsi, rejecting this reversal of fortune, aimed to regain what they saw as their rightful authority. With identity on everyone’s mind, efforts to eliminate official identity cards were unsuccessful.

By the early 1990s, the pressure to be Hutu or Tutsi above all else was intensifying. Many Rwandans still saw being Rwandan as more fundamental than being Hutu or Tutsi. Most still defined themselves in part on the basis of religious commitments, political ideologies, professional activities, family relations, or other identity considerations. Core identities other than Hutu and Tutsi, however, became increasingly difficult to maintain.

Two factors drove the dichotomization of Rwandans into what were deemed primordial Hutu and Tutsi categories. One was the threat from the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), a Tutsi-dominated army of Rwandan exiles that was making strong incursions from Uganda. The other was the rise of a political movement that called itself Hutu Power, which defined Rwanda as a Hutu nation. Hutu Power denounced the Tutsi as aliens descended from Ethiopian immigrants who had seized Rwanda centuries before and then collaborated with the European colonizers. Ultimately, they came to see Tutsi as “cockroaches” to be eliminated.

Although there were moderates among both Hutu and Tutsi, extremists on each side undermined the claims of moderates on the other. Moderate Hutu who advocated among their fellow Hutu a vision of Rwanda for all Rwandans were undermined by Tutsi extremists who advocated a return to Tutsi rule. The Tutsi extremists seemingly confirmed the claims of Hutu extremists about what Tutsi really wanted. Correspondingly, moderate Tutsi who advocated among their fellow Tutsi an inclusive and democratic Rwanda were undermined by the Hutu Power position that the Hutu were the true Rwandan nation. Hutu Power confirmed the claims of Tutsi extremists that the Hutu vision of Rwanda left no place for Tutsi.

On April 6, 1994, the president of Rwanda was killed when his plane was shot down as it prepared to land in Kigali, Rwanda’s capital. It remains unclear who shot it down, though many believe the RPF was responsible and no other serious suspects have emerged. Regardless, Hutu Power was ready to instigate genocide. Over the next hundred days some 200,000 Rwandans killed over 500,000 others, typically by slashing them to death with machetes. Most of the victims were Tutsi, many of whom were identified by their mandatory identity cards. But over the first few days, proponents of Hutu Power also killed thousands of moderate Hutu who were deemed to have betrayed their Hutu identity by accepting Tutsi as part of the Rwandan nation. In addition, untold thousands of Hutu in the path of the invading RPF were massacred by Tutsi forces.

The RPF overthrew the government and has ruled Rwanda ever since. President Paul Kagame’s government has been lauded for economic development and criticized for assassinations and disappearances of its political enemies. The government rejects as “genocide denial” any questioning of its official story of the 1994 genocide.

Education in Rwanda

King (2014) concludes that education played a major role in the societal trends leading to the 1994 Rwanda genocide and that Rwandan schools continue to play a major role in exacerbating social conflict. Her analysis, which is consistently thorough, insightful, and convincing, divides education in Rwanda into three successive historical periods: Belgian colonization (1919–1962), the post-colonial Republics (1962–1994), and the period since the 1994 genocide. Within each, she systematically addresses three interrelated issues: differential access to education, the presentation of Rwandan history, and the treatment of identity.

King interviewed, and quotes extensively from, 80 primary informants, most of whom had been teachers or students (or both) in Rwandan schools during one or more of the three historical periods. Most of the 75 Rwandans identified themselves as either Hutu or Tutsi. The other five interviewees were elderly Belgians, interviewed in Belgium, who had served as colonial administrators or missionaries. King also interviewed Rwandan professors and government officials, spoke informally with many other Rwandans, and studied curriculum materials and educational policy documents. Her presentation is scholarly, but she does not hesitate to reach conclusions justifiably critical of Rwandan educational policy and practice in all three historical periods.

Beginning with the Belgian colonial period, King notes that access to primary schools (grades 1–6) was extremely limited. Most primary students were Tutsi despite the fact that Tutsi were a minority (about 15%) of the population. Most students failed to complete grade 6 and only a tiny proportion—overwhelmingly Tutsi—went on to secondary education. History education in colonial primary schools consisted mostly of European history. Secondary schools taught a European version of Rwandan history in which the Tutsi were a superior Caucasian race that came south centuries ago from Ethiopia and rightly dominated the Hutu, a backward Bantu race that had arrived previously and dominated the indigenous Twa. Identity—defined as Hutu, Tutsi, or Twa—was highlighted throughout the secondary curriculum. The Twa, about 1% of the population, were marginalized and ignored. A typical text noted that the Hutu showed “atavistic stupidity” whereas the Tutsi, who were taller and had finer features, were “sage and prudent.” The Tutsi, as one teacher put it, were “aristocratic Negroes” (pp. 66–67).

Then, everything changed, except what did not. With independence in the early 1960s, the Hutu majority gained control for the first time, but the differentiation of Hutu from Tutsi intensified. Hutu access to schooling increased dramatically as Rwanda’s education system expanded, but Tutsi access beyond the primary level was limited by strict quotas. After independence, Rwandan history began to be taught in primary schools and received increased attention in secondary schools. Now the Tutsi were presented as immigrants who oppressed the Hutu cultivators already working the land. As one interviewee described the curriculum, “they said that Rwanda was for Hutu. They are Rwandan. The others, it is for them to stay in Ethiopia” (p. 102). In many classes toward the end of this period, students were required to sort them-

selves as Hutu or Tutsi. Most knew their group; those who did not learned where they belonged. Despite the dramatic reversal since colonial times in the status of the two groups, everyone still learned that one group was good and the other bad.

Looking across the colonial and post-colonial periods there are deep and troubling continuities. In addition to ongoing problems of differential access to education, we see divisive social processes of mandatory categorization and systematic group stigmatization. By the early 1990s, the division of Rwandans into Hutu and Tutsi categories was moving inexorably toward strictly dichotomized and collectivized identities. Each Rwandan was identified and understood first and foremost as Hutu or Tutsi. The associated stigmatization, meanwhile, was escalating into the radical dehumanization that makes genocide possible.

In spring 1994 the schools all closed as hundreds of thousands of Hutu killed hundreds of thousands of Tutsi. The rivers were clogged with the bodies of Tutsi on their way back, it was said, to Ethiopia.

The genocide ended in July 1994 when the Tutsi-dominated RPF that had been invading from Uganda took control of the country. It was led by Paul Kagame, who has dominated Rwanda ever since and is now its president. The situation was grim in all respects, including education.

The last normal year of schooling was 1990 and schools closed completely during the 1994 genocide. Much of the educational infrastructure was destroyed. Schools themselves were often sites of mass atrocities. About 75 percent of teachers were killed, fled the country, or were imprisoned on genocide charges. (p. 111)

The new regime proclaimed that all Rwandans are Rwandan. It ended the official classification of Rwandans into Hutu, Tutsi, and Twa categories on identity cards and elsewhere and strongly discouraged the public use of these categories. Claiming a concern with pervasive “genocide ideology,” the government of Rwanda now jails its citizens for *divisionism*, which King writes is “increasingly a synonym for disagreeing with the government” (p. 116).

[T]he current government is working on a presumption that it can tell Rwandans what to do and that they will do it—that it can engineer a new reality relatively easily. The logic of the Kagame regime seems to go as follows: tell them to reconcile and the population will do so. Teach them a new history and they will embrace it. Notify them that Hutu, Tutsi, and Twa no longer exist and it will be so. (p. 117)

Schools began reopening in September 1994. Many of the returning children had witnessed deadly violence and many were orphans. Education was expected to serve both economic development and national unity. Access to education remained inequitable, but in new ways. Whereas Hutu access had been restricted in the colonial period and Tutsi access to secondary and higher education had been restricted by quotas during the post-colonial Republics, there was now no official distinction between Hutu and Tutsi. The policy of funding education for genocide survivors, however, systematically favored – and continues to favor – Tutsi over Hutu.

By the fall of 1994, the post-genocide regime suspended the teaching of history and prioritized the rewriting of history books. In 1995, the new government of Rwanda called for “a manual of Rwanda’s history” that would (in the government’s words) “rehabilitate certain historical truths that had been sacrificed for the sake of ideological manipulation” (p. 121). In recent years, there have been several initiatives to resume the teaching of history. For the most part, however, the moratorium on teaching the history of Rwanda remains in effect two decades after the genocide. Thus Rwanda’s schools no longer teach a history favoring Tutsi, as they did in the colonial era, or a history favoring Hutu, as they did during the Republics. They simply do not teach history at all. As for identity, students in Rwanda’s schools are no longer expected to identify themselves as Hutu, Tutsi, or Twa, but they continue to see themselves and each other in these terms. Requiring everyone to be Rwandan above all else is a major change from requiring everyone to be Hutu, Tutsi, or Twa above all else, but it is equally coercive.

Nevertheless, King reports a broad consensus among Rwandans that Rwanda’s schools should teach a single genuine history. As one interviewee suggested, “My idea is that we find a group of researchers that we put together, that they study the real history of the country. Even if it takes years, we’ll teach the history that is true” (pp. 130–131).

In Rwanda, and everywhere else, it is not enough to get children to school and protect them from violence. Education is crucial, but not just any education will do. Education can promote genocide. What Rwanda needs, King argues, is education for peace and conflict resolution. Such education requires equal access for all, serious teaching of history, and respect for critical thinking and intellectual freedom, especially regarding history and identity (Moshman, 2009).

Conclusion

The 2014 Nobel Peace Prize highlighted the “struggle against the suppression of children and young people and for the right of all children to education.” In presenting this as a single struggle, it seemed to construe the struggle for the right to education as part of, or at least consistent with, the struggle against suppression of children. But the story of Rwanda reminds us that official curricula and associated school practices are not always part of the struggle against suppression. On the contrary they often contribute to the suppression of children and young people through ideological approaches to history and stringent restrictions on expression, discussion, and identity. For education to serve the role assumed in the Nobel citation we cannot define it so broadly as to encompass any and all curricula governments devise and anything schools happen to do. To the extent that students are being constrained and indoctrinated, they are not engaged in genuine learning

or development and thus are not being educated. We must insist on curricula and pedagogical practices that make education part of the “struggle against the suppression of children and young people” rather than part of the system of suppression.

Rwanda is just one small country, but it is typical in important ways. Every country has its own problems of history, identity, violence, denial, and indoctrination. Systematic manipulations of social identity and associated falsifications of history often contribute to generations of violence. Thus, even as we do our best to make education available and safe for all children and youth, we must not be satisfied with exposing children to whatever schools happen to do. Moving beyond the 2014 Peace Prize, we must ensure that what passes for education is really education.

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