



2020

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### Recommended Citation

Meyer, Travis (2020) "Eternal Victims: The Sufferings of the Twa People from Their First Contact with Other Peoples until the Present Day," *The Thetean: A Student Journal for Scholarly Historical Writing*: Vol. 49 : Iss. 1 , Article 10.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/thetean/vol49/iss1/10>

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Article

## Eternal Victims

### The Sufferings of the Twa People from Their First Contact with Other Peoples until the Present Day

Travis Meyer

IN 1994, AN ESTIMATED EIGHT HUNDRED THOUSAND RWANDANS WERE systematically killed over the course of three months.<sup>1</sup> Born out of the aftermath of a three year long civil war between Rwanda's two principal ethnic groups, the Tutsi and the Hutu, the Rwandan Genocide has pushed the nation into the spotlight of scrutiny as historians, humanitarians, and everyday people ask themselves how one group of people could commit such an atrocity against another. Since the genocide, countless researchers have explored the history of Rwanda and the infamy of the centuries-old Tutsi-Hutu rivalry, while honoring the Hutu and the Tutsi victims of both the genocide as well as the decades of war and civil unrest that preceded it. However, far less focus has been placed on Rwanda's third principal ethnic group, who have arguably suffered more than either the Hutu or the Tutsi. Though the Hutu and the Tutsi have alternated between being in power and being oppressed, there is one group that has only experienced the latter: the Twa. This paper aims to pull back the curtain to expose the reality that the Twa have been victims of centuries of oppression.

Before the genocide, relatively little historical research had been conducted concerning Rwanda, as it was neither a particularly large nor populated country,

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1. Kyrsten Sinema, *Who Must Die in Rwanda's Genocide?* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2015), 131.

not politically powerful, and was, in reality, just another face in the crowd of African nations making efforts at democratization. Following the genocide, however, many publications were written with the aim of discovering the causes, details, and outcomes of the killings that took place at the close of the twentieth century, such as J. J. Carney's *Rwanda Before the Genocide* (2013), André Guichaoua's *From War to Genocide* (2015), and Christopher Taylor's *Sacrifice as Terror: The Rwandan Genocide of 1994* (1999). However, these books nearly always exclusively focused on the Hutu and the Tutsi, with minimal mention of the Twa. This is likely due to the fact that the Twa have kept no written records, and rely on oral tradition to maintain their history. It is the aim of this paper, therefore, to use the research of Rwandan historians, the oral histories of the Twa, and modern-day interviews and interactions to chronicle the struggles of the Twa from the time of first contact with other peoples to the mistreatment they receive today, both by non-Twa citizens and by the governments who have ruled them.

It is true that in modern-day Rwanda, the Twa make up less than one percent of the country's population, but it was not always so. According to both oral history and anthropological research, the Twa are the original inhabitants of the African Great Lakes region.<sup>2</sup> No historical evidence has been discovered suggesting that they migrated from any other region. Imagine their reaction, then, when around 1100 AD, the ethnic groups known as the Hutu and the Tutsi began to arrive in their land.<sup>3</sup> From their first contact, the Hutu and the Tutsi immediately began to subordinate the Twa, and would continue to do so for centuries to come. The Twa have become the forgotten victims of the assertion of dominance perpetrated by both the Hutu and the Tutsi from precolonial times, by the Europeans as colonization of the country began, and during armed conflicts after Rwanda obtained independence.

## Precolonization

The Twa have always been viewed in the Rwandan community as lesser than the Tutsi and the Hutu, not only socially and politically, but even theologically.

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2. Jerome Lewis, *The Batwa Pygmies of the Great Lakes Region* (Minority Rights Group, 2000), 6–7.

3. Timothy Longman, *Christianity and Genocide in Rwanda* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 10.

According to religious oral tradition, the Tutsi, Hutu, and Twa are the descendants of three brothers, Gatutsi, Gahutu, and Gatwa. These brothers were the children of Kigwa, who had fallen from heaven and created Rwanda. When time came for Kigwa to choose the successor to his throne, he did so by entrusting a pot of milk to each of his sons, instructing them to guard the pots overnight. When Kigwa returned to his sons the following morning, he discovered that Gatwa had drunk his pot of milk, Gahutu had fallen asleep and knocked his pot over in the night, and Gatutsi had faithfully watched over his pot. For these actions, he determined that Gatutsi and his descendants were destined to rule over the other two and that Gahutu was consigned to hard, manual labor. As for Gatwa, he was to be cursed for his gluttony, condemned to be a clown and a slave to his brothers.<sup>4</sup> There have been variations on this creation myth throughout Rwandan history, but the common factor linking the stories together is the hierarchy that the myth establishes; that the Tutsi are destined to rule, the Hutu are to perform hard labor, and the Twa are base creatures, almost less than human, and good for nothing but servitude.<sup>5</sup>

The ethnic and social structures implicit in this origin story accurately reflect the early interactions between the two upper classes and the Twa lower class. The Twa were the original inhabitants of what is present-day Rwanda. They were a pygmy people, short in stature, and surviving as hunter-gatherers living in the forests. They came into contact with the Hutu and the Tutsi between 700 and 1500 AD, as the two groups migrated to their territory from northern parts of Africa. When the groups arrived, they began to clear the forests where the Twa lived in order to make space for herding (the Tutsi form of livelihood) and agriculture (the Hutu form of livelihood).<sup>6</sup> When the Twa were forced out of the forests and as the Tutsi rose to power in the region, the Twa had to find occupations besides hunting and gathering. However, they were only permitted by the Hutu and the Tutsi to perform the lowliest of jobs, largely becoming potters or servants of the Tutsi, acting as their executioners, jesters, and torturers.<sup>7</sup>

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4. Sinema, *Who Must Die?*, 46

5. Aimable Twagilimana, *The Debris of Ham: Ethnicity, Regionalism, and the 1994 Rwandan Genocide* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2003), 36.

6. Twagilimana, *The Debris of Ham*, 38–39; Mahmood Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers: Colonialism, Nativism, and the Genocide in Rwanda* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 61.

7. Christopher C. Taylor, *Milk, Honey, and Money: Changing Concepts in Rwandan Healing* (Washington D.C. and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992), 14–15, 38–39.

Even as the Tutsi became the dominant group in the region over the Hutu and Twa, their relationship with the Hutu was one of some level of equality. The two groups socially interacted and even intermarried. However, neither group extended the same courtesy toward the Twa. It was common practice for the Hutu and the Tutsi to share meals together, but to refuse food to the Twa and exclude them from social gatherings. The idea of intermarriage with a Twa was unthinkable.<sup>8</sup> This view of the Twa as creatures of a lower status than themselves is most shockingly apparent in royal religious rituals. Early Rwandan kings practiced sacred rituals, including “the path of inundation,” a ritual designed to curb excessive rainfall. The process included sacrificing a breastless or infertile Twa woman. This specific type of person was chosen because she was an ultimate demonstration of unproductivity, being unable to create or support new life, and being a member of a social caste that is considered to be lazy and wild.<sup>9</sup> The common consensus of the non-Twa in the region was that the Twa were savage, uncivilized and related more closely to wild creatures than to human beings.

## European Colonization

This perception of the Twa’s inhumanity by the Hutu and the Tutsi, unfortunately, was shared by the first Europeans that came into contact with these ethnic groups. In 1699, the English scientist and father of modern anatomy Edward Tyson penned a book entitled, *The Anatomy of a Pygmy Compared with that of a Monkey, an Ape, and a Man*, in which he studied the anatomy of pygmy peoples such as the Twa in order to determine whether they were human or animal in nature. After careful examination, Tyson concluded “That our *Pygmy* is no *Man*, nor yet the *Common Ape*; but a fort [*sic*] of *Animal* between both.”<sup>10</sup> This inhuman sentiment was shared by the first Europeans to colonize Rwanda, who arrived with preconceived notions about racial hierarchies. The European idea of evolution taught that some races were more evolved than others, and in a place where there were multiple races, the most evolved race was sure to

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8. Alison Des Forges, *Leave None to Tell the Story* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1999), 22.

9. Taylor, *Milk, Honey, and Money*, 37.

10. Edward Tyson, *Orang-Outang, sive Homo Sylvestris: or, the Anatomy of a Pygmy Compared with that of a Monkey, an Ape, and a Man* (London: T. Bennet and D. Brown, 1699), 91.

dominate. Within Rwanda, Europeans separated the inhabitants into three racial groups with the Hamitic race (the Tutsi) being the most evolved, the Bantu race (the Hutu) being second, and the Pygmoid (the Twa) being the least evolved. The placement of the Twa in the most inferior racial group influenced Europeans to view “the Twa as savage, dirty, and dishonest.”<sup>11</sup> This offers an explanation as to why the Europeans were willing to lend their support to the Tutsi in early Rwandan colonial history, and the Hutu in later history, while never attempting to ally with or support the Twa.

In addition to racially driven attempts to marginalize the Twa, the European treatment of the different ethnic groups was influenced by the political situation of Rwanda upon the European’s arrival. The first large groups of Europeans to arrive in Rwanda were the Germans in 1897, with the aim to obtain political power, and the Society of Missionaries of Africa, also known as the White Fathers, in 1900, there to convert the native inhabitants to Catholicism.<sup>12</sup> Though these two groups had different goals, they contrived the same means to achieve their ends. The founder of the White Fathers, Charles Lavigerie, believed that successful mass conversion would be achieved by focusing on converting the politically powerful.<sup>13</sup> Likewise, the Germans sought dominance over Rwanda by means of indirect rule, aiding the already ruling Tutsi king of Rwanda in fixing Rwandan borders and exerting political dominance over all who lived within those borders. This same line of thinking was followed by the Belgians, who took Rwandan control from the Germans following World War I. It is evident then that the earliest European colonists sought to meet their goals by allying themselves with the politically elite. These politically elite were, at the time of first colonization, the Tutsi. Over the years, however, leading into the late 1950s, power would shift to rising Hutu political parties. The Belgians, wary of anticolonial sentiment amid the Tutsi, shifted their support to the Hutu.<sup>14</sup> In either case, this plan of action necessitated, to a degree, following the agenda of those in power, even when it meant subjugating the lower classes, which always included the Twa.

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11. Longman, *Christianity and Genocide*, 61.

12. Longman, *Christianity and Genocide*, 38.

13. J. J. Carney, *Rwanda Before the Genocide: Catholic Politics and Ethnic Discourse in the Late Colonial Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 27–28, 32.

14. Christopher C. Taylor, *Sacrifice as Terror: The Rwandan Genocide of 1994* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 77.

## Rwandan Independence to Rwandan Genocide

Tensions between the growing Hutu power and the Tutsi monarchy came to a head in 1959, when the Hutu political leaders led by Grégoire Kayibanda overthrew the Tutsi monarchy and the Belgians and established Rwanda as an independent state. When this happened, the Twa, who had possessed some sympathy from the Tutsi for their role as servants, fell into worse conditions than they had already lived in. The Hutu recognized the servant-master relationship that had existed between the Twa and the Tutsi and treated the Twa as allies of the Tutsi. Many Twa were forced from their land to make way for Hutu who wanted it. During the 1960s, Kayibanda, now president of Rwanda, initiated the “peasant revolution,” distributing land among all Rwandans who had not fled the country during the revolution. However, the Twa were ignored during this process.<sup>15</sup> In 1973, Kayibanda was overthrown by a more moderate Hutu leader, Juvénal Habyarimana, who promised reform, specifically in the job market. Under Kayibanda, non-Hutu were often rejected job opportunities and were frequently in danger of being fired. Habyarimana created a policy that, in theory, would apportion government jobs, jobs in education, and some private jobs to Tutsi, Hutu, and Twa individuals based on their representation in the population. This policy, though fairer to non-Hutu, was still racist in nature, and would only offer about 1% of these jobs to people of Twa ethnicity. Sadly, even this tiny number of jobs promised to the Twa population ultimately went unrealized.<sup>16</sup>

Over the next twenty years, the Twa and the Tutsi would suffer together as the Rwandan government grew increasingly hostile towards all non-Hutu. Anti-Twa sentiment increased due to a rise in a Hutu-extremist ideology that labeled all non-Hutu as inferior. In 1993, the Twa were experiencing “land-grabbing; physical and verbal abuse; denial of access to vital local resources such as land, clay and water; denial of effective access to education, health care and legal redress.”<sup>17</sup> When the Hutu-led genocide began in April of 1994, many Twa were targeted and killed by Hutu extremists. Most Twa did not listen to radios, and they often did not know about the killings until they became eyewitnesses.

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15. Jerome Lewis, *The Twa Pygmies: Rwanda's Ignored People* (London: University College London, 2006), 5–6.

16. Taylor, *Sacrifice as Terror*, 79–80.

17. Lewis, *The Twa Pygmies*, 7.

One Twa woman reported, “When the war started all we could hear were the gunshots. So we tried to run away, myself, my husband and my five children. But then my husband was killed, my children are here with me. We have no clothes, we are hungry . . . A lot of people died because they refused to become [Hutu extremists].” This woman’s remark about becoming Hutu extremists is in reference to the fact that many Hutu forced groups of Twa to participate in killing Tutsis under threat of death if they refused.<sup>18</sup>

In order to escape the terrors of the Hutu, many Twa were forced to flee their homeland. Many did not survive the journey, having to evade the Hutu as they navigated their way outside of the country. Those who successfully escaped were able to reach refugee camps controlled by the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), a militant group of Tutsis who would eventually put an end to the Rwandan Genocide. Sadly, many RPF soldiers discriminated against the Twa within the refugee camps and threatened the Twa with violence if met with protests.<sup>19</sup> At the start of the genocide, an estimated 30,000 Twa lived in Rwanda. By 1995, only forty percent of the Twa from a year before remained in the country, with thirty percent having fled, and thirty percent having been killed.<sup>20</sup>

## Aftermath of Genocide and the Present Day

On 18 July 1994, the Rwandan Genocide ended. Since the beginning of the genocide in April, the RPF had begun making advances into Rwanda in order to take control of the state and end the killings. Over the next few months, they would conquer Rwanda piece by piece, ending their conquest in the Rwandan capital of Kigali in late July. The Tutsi were now safe, and efforts to help those Tutsi affected by the tragedy would begin immediately and continue to the present day. However, the same could not be said for the Twa. Though only a very small minority of Twa participated in the killings (and often at gunpoint), the RPF arrested and put to death all Twa males of particular communities where a few Twa had been known to be participating in the genocide. One Twa woman reported, “[After the war], when there were no authorities here, they didn’t want any men left in the commune. Every man, and even some boys, were

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18. Lewis, *The Twa Pygmies*, 10.

19. Lewis, *The Batwa Pygmies*, 24.

20. Lewis, *The Twa Pygmies*, 19.



caught and taken away. [The Tutsi] would come and take them to the soldier's camp nearby. The other survivors didn't want any men left in the villages."<sup>21</sup> The woman's designation of the Tutsi as the "other survivors" reveals the self-perception of the Twa as co-victims with the Tutsi in the genocide. Rwanda's central government today, unfortunately, does not share that view. In 1998, The Fund for Neediest Survivors of Genocide in Rwanda (FARG) was created by the Rwandan government "to provide assistance to survivors of genocide perpetrated against the Tutsi in Rwanda."<sup>22</sup> However, aid from this fund was and is only extended to Tutsi victims of the genocide. The Twa are excluded from receiving any support from this government-created program.<sup>23</sup>

The largest roadblock, perhaps, that the Twa face in receiving governmental aid is the fact that according to the government, the Twa do not exist. In 2003, the Republic of Rwanda created a new constitution that was geared towards national unity between all Rwandans. The constitution states that one part of this goal was the, "eradication of . . . divisionism based on ethnicity."<sup>24</sup> This has been interpreted to mean that there no longer exist different social or ethnic classes such as the Tutsi, the Hutu, or the Twa. The intent behind officially disintegrating ethnic groups is to promote unity between all Rwandans, but this policy is more hurtful than helpful to the Twa. The Rwandan government prohibits activist groups seeking to improve the quality of life for the Twa from making references to the Twa as a distinct people, under penalty of losing governmental support. For example, in 2007, the Community of Indigenous People of Rwanda, a pro-Twa organization, was forced to change their name to the Community of Rwandan Potters to avoid using the word "indigenous."<sup>25</sup> Whenever discrimination takes place, the government refuses to intervene, for by doing so, they would have to recognize the Twa as an ethnic group being discriminated against.

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21. Lewis, *The Batwa Pygmies*, 24.

22. Republic of Rwanda, "Historical Background of FARG", *FARG*, <http://www.farg.gov.rw/index.php?id=11>, (accessed 6 June 2019).

23. Minority Rights Group International, "Twa," *World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous People*, <https://minorityrights.org/minorities/twa-2/> (Accessed 6 June, 2019).

24. Constitute Project, *Rwanda's Constitution of 2003 with Amendments through 2015*, 10, [https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Rwanda\\_2015.pdf?lang=en](https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Rwanda_2015.pdf?lang=en), (Accessed 6 June 2019).

25. Minority Rights Group International, "Twa."

## Conclusion

Rwanda has undergone many changes in the past five hundred years. Since 1500, it has transformed from a Tutsi kingdom, to a country ruled indirectly by Europeans, to an independent Hutu nation, and finally to a democratic republic claiming that its citizens carry no ethnic identity other than “Rwandan.” But what has not changed from that first interaction between different ethnic groups to the present day is the treatment of the Twa as outcasts, unequal with other Rwandans.

It was previously mentioned how in precolonial times, the Hutu and the Tutsi would share food and dine with each other, but not with the Twa. Sometime near the end of the twentieth century, before the Rwandan Genocide but during a period of tension between the Hutu and the Tutsi, an anthropologist named Christopher Taylor traveled to Rwanda and had a meal with Rwandans of various ethnic identities, including a Twa man who sat beside Christopher. When Christopher received a cup of drink that was being passed around the group, he took his portion and attempted to pass it to the Twa. A friend in the group stopped him and said, “No. He receives his portion separately.”<sup>26</sup> Through the hundreds of years of power exchanges, bloodshed, and governmental reform, the tradition of excluding the Twa has endured. The Twa remain social outcasts and a people disregarded by their government. The Twa remain the lowest of classes and, regardless of differences, the Tutsi, Hutu, and governmental authorities work in harmony to ensure that they do not forget it.

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*Travis Meyer is a Junior at Brigham Young University majoring in history teaching and minoring in Latin American studies. Though his emphasis is in precolonial and colonial Latin American history, his interest in the history of indigenous groups led to his study of the Twa. Following graduation, he plans to pursue Masters and Doctoral degrees related to the study of native Mesoamerican civilizations. Born and raised in Southern California, Travis enjoys reading, critically analyzing film, and camping.*

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26. Taylor, *Milk, Honey, and Money*, 75.

