Your Classic Bongo Story: Representations of the Rwandan genocide in the broadsheet press

Max Whittaker

During one hundred days between April 6, 1994 and July 19, 1994, the world bore witness to the most brutally efficient genocide of the twentieth century. An initial report published by the Rwandan Ministry of Local Government in December 2001, endorsed by the national Rwandan government, established a figure in excess of one million Rwandan deaths. This figure was based upon a census carried out six years after the genocide in July 2000, during which the names of 951,018 victims were documented (Melvern 2006, 252). The Rwandan genocide remains distinguishable from other genocidal projects of the twentieth century in that the international community could have intervened during the genocide at relatively low costs, but decided not to (Barnett 2002, 1-2). Indeed, upon the outbreak of genocide, the United Nations immediately ordered its forces not to protect civilians and on April 21, adopted Resolution 912, which ordered all but 270 troops to be withdrawn from Rwanda.

This paper argues that the reporting of events in Rwanda during the summer of 1994 drew on clichéd expectations of African nations and people, especially those of sub-Saharan Africa, and in doing so failed to challenge, indeed even supported, the inadequacies of international response to the developing crisis. The use of stereotype as a shortcut in the coverage of complex issues is a ploy expected of the tabloid press, but, as this study shows, UK and US broadsheets, more usually associated with investigative reporting, regularly employed similar language. The problems faced in shaping accurate accounts of events in the rapidly deteriorating and chaotic conditions in Rwanda are recognized but, in the main, it is demonstrated that correspondents relied on limited sources, fell back on established stereotypes, and remained uncritical of international inaction.

The rationale of policy-makers, themselves, represented fundamental misconceptions surrounding the genocide, constructed upon preconceived ideas about African conflict. Such reasoning, however, cannot be formed in isolation. The conclusions of the Security Council had much to do with the importance that Western observers attached to Africa, the way in which Africa was thought of and the language used to describe it (Dowden 2004, 251). This is particularly true of central African states, still thought of in terms of the ‘Dark Continent’
when even in the late twentieth century most commentators would have found difficulty in locating Rwanda on the map.

Considering the significance attached to Rwanda before the genocide in his memoir, Reuters’ journalist Aidan Hartley commented; ‘Before the outbreak of conflict, Rwanda was a country of no importance whatsoever, even in African terms. World markets, and therefore the majority of our clients’ interests, were totally unaffected by genocide in Central Africa’ (Hartley 2003, 396). Significantly, major news organizations visited Rwanda only upon the outbreak of major violence. As Fergal Keane contends, a limited perspective ‘produces journalism driven by stories of horror but markedly lacking in analysis or historical context’ (Keane 1996, 6-7). It would appear that familiarity with such stories has not so much bred contempt but has rather contributed to a general apathy amongst outside observers, desensitized to the reality of yet more human suffering emanating from Africa. Consequently, stories of atrocity that emerge from Africa were not and, arguably, are not accorded sufficient coverage and, consequently, the moral concern they require. As Hartley further informs us, ‘at the best of times it was almost impossible to get more than one African story at a time into the headlines. And in the month of April 1994, editors around the world were preparing for one of the most hopeful stories in the decade to come out of our benighted continent: South Africa’s first multicultural elections, which would surely sweep Nelson Mandela into power’ (Hartley 2003, 354).

Western chauvinism undoubtedly influenced much reporting. Aidan Hartley instances a colleague who believed that Reuters’ editors regarded the massacres in Rwanda ‘as your classic bongo story. There’s not going to be any interest unless they start raping white nuns. Cover the whites get the nuns evacuated and that’s the end of it. That’s what they want’ (Hartley 2003, 353-54). As shall be demonstrated, such sentiments were by no means exceptional. Moreover, they reflect the extent to which many had come to expect and accept frequent massacres in Africa, while also highlighting the prevailing cultural and cognitive framework that informed the vast majority of reporting. As Fergal Keane came to concede, to most in the international community, the words Tutsi and Hutu were ‘synonymous with tribal slaughter…[T]he general consensus among those of us watching the pictures…was that Rwanda was a madhouse, a primitive torture chamber where rival tribes were settling old scores’ (Keane 1996, 6). Although Richard Dowden, the Africa editor for The Independent was warned in January 1994 of an impending genocide, he decided not to commit this
warning to print: ‘only one person in Kigali had warned me that there could be a genocide: Philippe Gaillard of the International Committee of the Red Cross. Everyone else I spoke to talked up the Arusha peace process. I had not been in Kigali long enough to make a judgment or doubt my interlocutors, so to write a story about an impending genocide would have been dishonest and irresponsible’ (Dowden 2004, 249).

Given the lack of attention previously dedicated to Rwanda, and Africa in general, it would appear that many within the media formulated opinions based upon nothing more than a general impression of African history. Upon the outbreak of genocide, much reporting circulated a profoundly unsophisticated caricature of African conflict. In language almost condoning events, an article in The New York Times spoke of ‘Tribes and cultures whose only common heritage, unless held in check by a brutal dictatorship, is warfare against one another’ (The New York Times 1994a). Although an article in The Independent referred to a ‘genocide’ less than one week after the massacres began – the first article to do so – it crucially confused the aggressors and the victims, concluding that the Hutu and Tutsi, ‘…live and die like Siamese twins who hate each other’ (The Independent 1994a). Almost exclusively, the notion of ‘Gangs of youths wielding machetes…settling tribal scores’ (The Independent 1994b) underscored those column inches reserved for the genocide. Aaron Makuba, a member of the political bureau and advisor for administrative and political affairs to the Minister of Agriculture, expressed his dismay at the inadequate political analysis of the genocide.

I get enraged when I listen to the international media and commentators describe what has happened in Rwanda as an ‘ethnic war’…If this is an ethnic war, can you please tell me why my family has been killed? They were all Hutu. Why almost all my Hutu friends who were politically active have been killed? During the first two days of the carnage, most of the people who were targeted were Hutus. Yet the world persists in characterising the bloodshed as ethnic clashes. (African Rights 1995, 257)

While it was accurate to say the human responses in Rwanda were overwhelmed in the killers by tribal hatred, this emotion was itself a product of conscious political manipulation (Glover 2001, 122). Initial media reports, however, undermined by an acute absence of political analysis, failed to expose the political manipulation that underlay the genocide. An editorial
in *The Times* provides an instructive example; ‘There is no method in Rwanda’s madness…Which parties would be asked to cease fire against whom? (*The Times* 1994a)

Such rhetorical devices were both severely misleading and irresponsible, primarily because, as Linda Melvern reminds us, ‘genocide does not take place in a context of anarchy’ (Melvern 2001, 198).

Nonetheless, the prevailing inference that Rwandan violence represented uncontrollable savagery beyond the influence of the international community was not sufficiently contradicted. Indeed, this notion was freely articulated often in explicit terms. In May, after genocide had been acknowledged by several UN officials, an editorial in *The Guardian* asserted: ‘…the killing fields of Rwanda are terrible to behold: a madness beyond any logic and comprehension…Glum pragmatism dictates that there is precious little the international community can do to stem the fighting in Africa…Rwanda, like its twin, Burundi, has been in a simmering state of civil war since independence in 1962’ (*The Guardian* 1994a). While stating that the international community could not successfully intervene between two tribes, inextricably connected by alternating cycles of violence, notable columnists made non-intervention morally justifiable as an editorial in *The Independent* demonstrates; ‘Much as it may appear to the contrary, the Clinton administration is not engaged in a cynical plot to end the United Nation’s role in peacekeeping, nor is it planning to trim UN efforts at peacekeeping …No one has a solution for such intractable problems as these’ (*The Independent* 1994c).

On occasions, it was further suggested that Rwanda’s Tutsi rulers had in some sense aggravated the crimes now being committed against Rwandan civilians. For example, an article in *The Independent* implied that the Tutsis were merely harvesting what they had sown; ‘Periodically in the past the Tutsis have massacred Hutus in their thousands. In the last year, the Hutu have turned on their former maters’ (*The Independent* 1994d). To imply that the Hutu extremest were somehow justified in their aggression was severely irresponsible, primarily because the aggression was not solely directed at Rwanda’s ‘Tutsi maters’ but all Tutsi – politicians and civilians – as well as pro-democratic Hutu politicians. Of course, it is a truism that those responsible for atrocities are often people whose own dignity has not been respected (Glover 2001, 407). Indeed, it may even be asserted that the tough minority rule visited upon the majority Hutu precipitated genocide. However, the notion that Rwanda’s Tutsi had somehow provoked genocide was, and remains, perniciously misleading. It must be
emphasized that, prior to the arrival of Europeans, there had never been systematic violence between the two groups in Rwanda. Divisions were rather formed in the late nineteenth century by European colonialists, influenced by diaphanous historical myths and the racial positivism of nineteenth-century science.

It is, of course, necessary to acknowledge those reports that transcended the caricature. While not explicitly acknowledging genocide, an article in The Times on April 12, concluded: ‘Although it is impossible for outsiders to identify who is murdering who, most of the killing is probably not random but carried out along ethnic and political lines’ (The Times 1994b). As has been noted, the word genocide was used in The Independent on April, 10, however it was a piece in The New York Times on April, 23 that was the first to explicitly acknowledge a genocide committed against a minority ethnic group: ‘What looks very much like genocide has been taking place in Rwanda. People are pulled from cars and buses and ordered to show their identity papers and then killed on the spot if they belong to the wrong ethnic group…’ (The New York Times 1994b).

There were, however, no headlines about genocide. Perhaps tellingly, there are instances of journalists, having departed from the idea of tribal warfare, finding their work suppressed. For instance, on April, 28, Scott Petersen dispatched a story entitled, ‘Pattern of systematic killings of the Tutsi minority group amounts to genocide’ to his editors. The story, however, was returned to Petersen, with the epithet Not Used scrawled across it (Petersen 2001, 253). Most notably, during May, as the genocide approached its apogee, Rwanda was relegated to the margins of international coverage, as resources and budgets were dedicated to the elections in South Africa. In great contrast, Rwanda was considered superfluous by many news organizations. As Hartley writes; ‘to find that Reuters… saw Rwanda as too expensive to cover filled me with despair’ (Hartley 2003, 397). Those column inches reserved for Rwanda routinely advanced consequential misconceptions, often based upon the entirely mistaken assumption that Rwanda’s capital, Kigali, was Rwanda in microcosm.

In fact, the almost exclusive focus on the battle of Kigali distorted the entire nature of the massacres in Rwanda in two important respects. Firstly, the predicted death-tolls were often a gross underestimates. An article in The Times was contented to assert ‘estimates of 10 000 - 20 000 deaths seem entirely plausible’ (The Times 1994c). Such approximations were substantiated in other publications, such as The New York Times, which reported on April, 20,
‘Tens of thousands of Rwandans have been killed (The New York Times 1994c). There is a significant and related point that requires acknowledgment; civilian deaths were repeatedly connected, and attributed, to the civil war. In the concentrated fighting around Kigali the intense exchanges of mortar and shellfire between the government forces and the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) did result in many civilian casualties. (African Rights 1995, 1063) Journalists, therefore, had great difficulty in accurately designating responsibility for civilian massacres in Kigali. Accordingly, Rwanda’s ‘warring factions’ and the civilian death toll were regularly spoken of in terms that implied both correlation and causation.

Secondly, the notion that the Tutsi rebels were ‘gaining the upper hand in the battle for Kigali’ (The Times 1994d) was widely advanced, thus obscuring the overwhelming, Hutu-orchestrated massacres throughout the Rwandan countryside. On April, 13, it was reported that 2,400 rebels from the opposition RPF were about to enter Kigali. The article quotes a French officer, who believed the Rwandan Army had not a ‘hope in hell’ of repelling the advance (The Independent 1994e). Indeed, a parallel article in the same publication implied that the Hutu government now feared Tutsi reprisals; ‘Tutsi rebels fought their way into the Rwandan capital yesterday, sending the government, foreigners and thousands of residents fleeing in fear of a new wave of tribal blood letting’ (The Independent 1994f). The following day Wilson Rutayisire, an official of the RPF, told The Times, ‘… government forces had little hope of repelling the [RPF] advance’ (The Times 1994e). This notion was articulated throughout April, and remained manifest during May, for instance when The Guardian reported that the Interahamwe were ‘encircled by the RPF’, which now ‘controls a swathe of Rwanda’ (The Guardian 1994b).

Throughout the genocide, focus remained almost exclusively on Kigali, while in the countryside thousands of Rwandans were daily consigned to history’s untold narrative. There were no journalists in the rural areas reporting on the massacres. One reason, of course, was security. Moreover, as has been noted, most news corporations devoted resources to South Africa, in preparation for the elections. Furthermore, Journalists were faced with considerable obstacles when attempting to accurately cover the rural massacres. Indeed, reporting the massacres in Kigali was in itself hazardous. There were no flights to Rwanda’s capital Kigali or anywhere else in the country. To try to enter Rwanda from the south through Burundi would, in practice, have been equally perilous, as Burundi too had been destabilized by the death of its president (Dowden 2004, 249). As Petersen informs us: ‘In Kigali, the difficulties
of working as a journalist were compounded because no one wanted witnesses. Travel through the city became more and more risky, then impossible’ (Petersen 2001, 260). Aidan Hartley came to write, ‘it became clear to most of [the journalists] that this was the wrong place to be. The guerrillas had launched an offensive, and to reach Kigali overland from here would mean crossing government forces’ lines during full-scale fighting’ (Hartley 2003, 355). To a significant extent, circumstance did not permit any closer intimacy between journalists and the massacres. Journalists constantly had to be wary of ambushes, as areas were often ‘infested’ with militia soldiers (Hartley 2003, 357). Over a decade after the genocide, Fergal Keane wrote in The Observer: ‘[Rwanda] was still a traumatising place. A week before, the BBC's Geoff Spink and Andy Kershaw were caught in an attack and hunted through the bush by members of the Interahamwe. They were lucky to escape. It simply is not possible to convey the atmosphere of terror for those of us who tried to cover the genocide’ (The Observer 2006a).

It would be disingenuous to imply that that press deliberately advanced a false-hood. As Peterson, remarked: ‘Unless you had been a very close observer of Rwanda before the genocide, in those first days it was not clear what was happening, nor how organized it was’ (Petersen 2001, 253). Indeed, even close observers often failed to recognize that organized massacres were the most immediate cause of continued hostilities. One week into the genocide, Roméo Dallaire told The Guardian: ‘We have been looking and trying to find the means by which the two sides would be prepared to face each other. The difficulties have been one side not recognizing the others government’ (The Guardian 1994c). As this evidence demonstrates, there was initially an ambiguity surrounding the genocide that deceived even those whose intimacy may have been expected to yield a more accurate analysis. Aidan Hartley writes articulately on this issue:

Foreigners struggle to understand what was happening in Rwanda. Rwanda was one of the greatest acts of inhumanity of the twentieth century alongside the extermination of the Jews…or the mass deaths in Stalin’s USSR…They say we journalists ignored the story for months. We were there all the time. What’s true is that we did not understand at the time the full magnitude of what was happening. I had no idea of the scale of what I was witnessing. And when I did become aware I discovered Rwanda was way beyond my limited talents as a
correspondent. We did not have the eloquence to make the world see the truth until it was too late. (Hartley 2003, 390-91)

While many misconceptions were advanced by the media’s coverage of the genocide, those who may have been expected to possess the most reliable knowledge were often conspicuously ill-informed. For example, upon the outbreak of genocide, the American director of Care International in Rwanda, Steve Wallis, told The Times of ‘looting’ and of Government soldiers ‘shooting indiscriminately’ (The Times 1994f). A further article in The Times attributed the following comments to leader of the RPF, Paul Kagame: ‘There is absolute anarchy, no government, no authority’ (The Times 1994g). Each one of Kagame’s assertions was fundamentally untrue. As these examples demonstrate, those individuals who could reasonably have been expected to possess reliable information often served to distort the reality of the genocide. Consequently, journalists consistently failed to comprehend and convey the fundamental antithesis between indiscriminate slaughter and genocide.

Furthermore, the activities of the press were greatly obstructed by the interim government which, as of 8 April, commenced a systematic campaign of disinformation so as to distort the reality of their genocidal campaign. Hutu extremists sought to portray the killings in Rwanda as a spontaneous eruption of tribal warfare and deliberately obfuscated the issues of the war and the mass killing, while remaining uncompromising in their insistence that a ceasefire was a precondition for ending the massacres. (African Rights 1995: 250) As late as July, the Rwandan government, in particular the Foreign Minister, Jérôme Bicamumpaka, remained committed to a campaign of disinformation, maintaining to the international media: ‘We want France to interpose itself between the belligerent sides’ (The New York Times 1994d).

The extent to which the regime’s anti-Tutsi propaganda was still manifest in post-genocide Rwanda is revealed in an interview between The Independent and an international aid worker, who remarked of the RPF: ‘As far as I am concerned, we are talking about Khmer Rouge type people. They indoctrinate youths and talk in political-speak’ (The Independent 1994g). Much of the anti-Tutsi hysteria came to be exposed as fabricated. For example, an International Aid worker told The Guardian: ‘People are walking around with machetes attacking others, but it is very difficult to confirm who is responsible. People just accuse the RPF. People leave the camps. Their friends left behind don’t hear from them and they tell us they have been killed by the RPF. But when we check on it they are alive’ (The Guardian
1994d). However, the pervasive nature of anti-Tutsi propaganda disseminated by the Hutu government greatly obscured the reality to many journalists. Only after the Hutus had succeeded in massacring the vast majority Rwanda’s Tutsi, did the method in Rwanda’s madness become apparent to journalists. As Aidan Hartley explains:

Suddenly there was a mad logic about it. The point was not to win the war but to wipe out the Tutsis. Hutu forces held a position long enough only so that the slaughter of civilians could be completed. Then they fell back, driving the remaining population before them into exile, taking their nation with them on foot, robbing the RPF of a people to govern. The RPF did not so much advance as get sucked into the vacuum of death the Hutus left behind. (Hartley 2003, 371)

While it is correct to emphasize that much reporting conformed to prejudice, it remains essential to recognize the honesty and integrity of those journalists whose endeavor gradually eroded falsity – the pernicious subdivision of Hutu extremism.

Nonetheless, the vast majority of early media reporting was grounded in ambiguity and pervaded by inaccuracy and thus served to distort rather than inform. As has been demonstrated misinformed reporting was, to some degree, dictated by circumstance. The international press cannot be held accountable for its inability to cover the rural killings in the first few days of the genocide. Moreover, journalists may be excused for not possessing a historian’s understanding of Rwandan society. It would be disingenuous to imply the international media was guilty of deliberate obfuscation. Essentially, events in Rwanda moved faster than the erosion of the press’ illusions. Nonetheless, the inadequate political analysis had disastrous consequences. Much confusion was caused by the failure to draw distinctions between the massacres and civil war. Oftentimes, analysis merely extended to cliché and caricature by way of compensating for the acute lack of intimate knowledge of Rwandan culture. Consequently, many journalists surrendered the greatest strength of independent media organizations; namely their potential to illuminate where governments and politics obfuscate. Under the ruse of political commentary, the media was complicit in perpetuating a series of myths analogous with those deliberately put forward by those states eager to avoid political, military and financial intervention.
The reporting of the media remains instructive as to the way in which tribal conflicts are perceived. When seeking to rationalize conflict, the exponents of warfare are neatly divided into two distinguishable groups; those who killed and those who were killed and often divided into separate ‘ethnic’ or ‘tribal’ groups (Meier 2004, 390). The term ‘tribal’, however, particularly when used in relation to African conflict, is used pejoratively; a rebuttal implying a savagery that resembles that of our ancestors. There exists a tendency, evident in the media’s representation of the Rwandan genocide, to regard tribalism as a distinctly African characteristic that precipitates the habitual descent into national suicide. This model is not so much uninformed but rather perniciously misleading and offers little by way of explanation, not least because some tribal divisions, as in Rwandan, are recent social creations. The press, however, reinforced the notion of a tribal conflict, as the product of ineradicable historical hostility. An editorial in *The Independent*, 11, April, 1994 commented: ‘The horrors being perpetrated in Rwanda and Burundi will, sadly, reinforce the widespread view that Rwanda is a lost continent, so barbarous, so deeply sunk in tribal conflict and so remote from our concerns that nothing can be done to help.’ However, making reference to Rwanda’s putative ‘ancient enmity between Hutu and Tutsi,’ the article concedes that, ‘…this may be uncomfortably near the truth’ (*The Independent* 1994h). The direct consequence of limited analysis of tribal conflicts, argues Glover, is that the immediate and remediable causes – political manipulation and belief traps – remain overlooked (Glover 2001, 141).

It has been observed that respect of dignity is not only an affirmation of fundamental human equality, respect for dignity presents one of the greatest barriers against atrocity and cruelty (Glover 2001, 150). Reducing a nation to the level of caricature is not an affirmation of human dignity. Moreover it serves to positively dehumanize an entire populace and so render them unworthy of our moral attention. In this respect, the media were complicit in implying non-intervention was morally excusable. The actions and omissions of policy makers were deemed permissible, as it was erroneously believed that no alternative course of action existed. Indeed, on occasions, non-intervention was a course explicitly asserted as morally correct. On April 22, 1994, an article in *The New York Times* stated: ‘The United Nations has no mandate to go to war against the fighting bands who have reduced much of the country into chaos’. The following day, the emphasis of justification was reinforced in the same publication. Making direct comparison to American peacekeeping operations in Somalia, and referring to ‘civil war’, an editorial stated: ‘It is easy if not morally easy to justify pulling out’ (*The New York Times* 1994e). Throughout the genocide, the prevailing inference was
that the massacres represented uncontrollable tribal savagery about which nothing could be done. Although much reporting expressed sympathy, it was undermined by an acute lack of political analysis, leading to what one author described as ‘compassion without understanding’ (Keane 1996, 7). Furthermore, those articles, which ostensibly appeared to contain political analysis, derived false conclusions. An article published in The New York Times, April 23, 1994, acknowledged a ‘genocidal conflict’ stating that, ‘Everywhere in Rwanda the Tutsi are now being targeted by Hutu extremists.’ However, the article concludes; ‘the world had little choice but to stand aside and hope for the best’ (The New York Times 1994f). By implying that there existed no better alternatives, the media legitimized policy omission and made active obstruction excusable.

Notes

1. Bicamumpaka is currently charged with various crimes against humanity and genocide related offences, all connected with his role in the 1994 Rwandan Genocide. Although he was not directly in charge of any of the Rwandan units carrying out the genocide, Bicamumpaka was part of the cabinet, put together by President Juvénal Habyarimana. Later, as a minister representing the MDR Party, Bicamumpaka was part of the interim Rwandan government that allegedly masterminded the killing of the Tutsi minority, and their moderate Hutu allies. It is also alleged that Bicamumpaka either personally ordered or had knowledge of and did nothing to stop parts of the genocide.

2. America suffered its most significant casualties since the Vietnam War when eighteen U.S. Rangers were killed in Somalia whilst conducting peacekeeping operations.

References


– 1994b. 8 April. ‘Hundreds die as Tribal Violence Sweeps Rwanda’, 1
– 1994c. 1 June. ‘In a World of Bitter Limitations’, 16.
– 1994h. 11 April. ‘Africa is not a Lost Continent’, 15.

– 1994e. 23 April. ‘Cold Choice in Rwanda’. Letter to Editor.

*The Observer* 2006a. 26 March. ‘Yes We Did Cover Horror of Rwanda’, Fergal Keane.

*The Times* 1994a. 11 April. Editorial: ‘Carnage in Africa: It is for the Rwandans themselves to cure their malaise’.
– 1994e. 14 April. 11.
– 1994g. 9 April. ‘Thousands Dead in Rwandan Civil War’, James Bone, 1.