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Origins, Rwanda

In the famous story, "the older brother", Cain, was a cultivator, and Abel, the younger, was a herdsman. They made their offerings to God—Cain from his crops, Abel from his herds. Abel's portion won God's regard. Cain's did not. So Cain killed Abel.

Rwanda, in the beginning, was settled by cave-dwelling pygmies¹, whose decedents today are called the Twa people, a marginalized and disenfranchised group that counts for less than 1% of the population. Hutus and Tutsis came later, but their origins and the order of their immigrations are not accurately known. While convention holds that Hutus are a Bantu people who settled Rwanda first, coming from the South and West, and the Tutsis are a Nilotic people who migrated from the North and East, these theories draw more on legend than on documentable fact. With time, Hutus and Tutsis spoke the same language, followed the same religion, intermarried, and lived intermingled, without territorial distinctions, on the same hills sharing the same social and political culture in small chiefdoms. The chiefs were called Mwamis, and some of them were Hutus and some Tutsis; Hutus and Tutsis fought together in the Mwamis' armies; threw marriage and clientage, Hutus would become hereditary Tutsis, and Tutsis would become hereditary Hutus. Because of all this mixing, ethnographers² and historians have lately come to agree that Hutus and Tutsis cannot be properly called distinct ethnic groups.

Still, the names Hutu and Tutsi stuck. They had meaning, and though there is no general agreement about what word best describes that meaning—"Classes," "casts", "ranks", are favorites—the source of the distinction is undisputed: Hutus were cultivators³ and Tutsis were herdsman. This was the original inequality: cattle are a more valuable asset than produce, and although some Hutus owned cows while Tutsis tilled the soil, the word "Tutsi" became synonymous with a political and economic elite. The stratification is believed to have been accelerated after 1860, when the Mwami Kigeri Rwabugiri, a Tutsi, ascended to the Rwandan throne and

¹ Pygmy is a term used for various ethnic groups worldwide whose average height is unusually low; anthropologists define pygmy as any group whose adult males grow to less than 150 cm (4 feet 11 inches) in average height.

² anthropologists that provide scientific descriptions of individual human societies

³ agriculturist: someone concerned with the science or art or business of cultivating the soil

initiated a series of military and political campaigns that expanded and consolidated his dominion over a territory nearly the size of the present republic.

But there is no reliable record of the pre-colonial state. Rwandans had no alphabet; their tradition was oral, therefore malleable⁴; and because their society is fiercely hierarchical, the stories they tell of their past tend to be dictated by those who hold power, either through the state or in opposition to it. Of course, at the core of Rwanda's historical debates lie competing ideas about the relationship between Hutus and Tutsis, so it is a frustration that the pre-colonial roots of that relationship are largely unknowable. As the political thinker Mahmood Mamdani has observed: "That much of what passed as historical fact in academic circles has to be considered as tentative—if not outright fictional—is becoming clear as post-genocidal sobriety compels a growing number of historians to take seriously the political uses to which their writings have been put, and their readers to question the certainty with which many a claim has been advanced."

So Rwandan history is dangerous. Like all of history, it is a record of successive struggles for power, and to a very large extent power consists in the ability to make others inhabit your story of their reality—even, as is so often the case, when that story is written in their blood. Yet some facts, and some understandings, remain unchallenged.



⁴ Flexible, liable to change