

# To Be Hutu or Tutsi Is Not Illegal

One of the most remarkable steps the post-genocide government in Rwanda has taken towards fostering a society in which citizenship (Rwandanness) matters more than whatever other identities one may feel defined by was the initiation of the 'ndi umunyarwanda' (I am a Rwandan) campaign.

It came years after the abolition of national identity cards in which one's identity as a Muhutu, Mututsi or Mutwa, the three categories to which an indigenous Rwandan may belong, was given prominence.

The abolition of those identity cards and their replacement with a new one without such labels happened alongside moves to de-emphasise identity categories that in the past determined what rights and privileges one was entitled to.

Experts on Africa have long argued that attachment to clan or tribe rather than to nation is one of the major barriers to the creation of national identities and integration, and therefore one of the contributors to the divisions that lie at the root of the political and socioeconomic upheavals that spring therefrom.

Indeed, behind the divisions that had bedevilled Rwanda from just before independence, which culminated into the genocide against the Tutsis, was the importance the three categories had been accorded and how (being deemed as) belonging to one determined what place one occupied in terms of what rights one enjoyed and which ones they were denied.

Which is why when the post-genocide government took steps to promote a national identity as the primary identity that determined one's rights and obligations, one would have hoped that it would win the approval of experts who have long

decried the absence from most African countries of national consciousness.

Instead, the Government of Rwanda came under attack for allegedly abolishing ethnicity or for living in denial about its importance to ordinary Rwandans.

Some experts went as far as comparing Rwanda unfavourably to Burundi where categorization had retained its salience and was even used as a basis for appointing people to positions of power and responsibility.

Burundi was fronted as having adopted a "more realistic approach" and therefore as destined to be more stable and peaceful than Rwanda where the authorities were accused of imposing their views on ordinary Rwandans who were apparently being denied the freedom to be themselves.

The arguments were at best uninformed, at worst disingenuous. First, there is no law on post-genocide Rwanda's statute books that outlaws any of the different social categories Rwandans may want to group themselves into. Nor have ethnic labels been banned.

One hears them being mentioned on electronic media and reads them in print media. Anyone is free to call themselves Hutus or Tutsis or Twas and many do, still. What is now no longer acceptable is for anyone to use any of the categorisations as a basis for marginalizing or discriminating any category of people.

Nor is it acceptable for anyone to use their belonging to any social category as a basis for claiming privileges or special rights and denying them to others.

But it is also true that, given the extent to which they were exploited by politicians to divide society in the past, many Rwandans no longer want to wear their categories on their sleeve or forehead as it were, having decided that being

simply Rwandan is good enough.

Outsiders though often read this as Rwandans being 'afraid' to tell total strangers which social or ethnic category they belong to, apparently preferring to "repeat the official line".

So, in many ways, the 'ndi munyarwanda' initiative came in to deepen the process of relegating social categories to secondary importance behind citizenship.

No doubt, it caused some unease internally, as some Rwandans also read it as a move designed by the authorities to homogenise the Rwandan society in a way that was totally unnatural.

*But in cementing the idea that it mattered not what category anyone believed themselves to belong to, and that what really mattered was being a citizen, and that it entitles one to the same rights as everyone else, it added another layer of bricks to the wall that separates the New Rwanda from the old, pre-genocide one.*

But challenges remain. Perhaps the greatest is that, among the 60 percent of Rwandans who were born after the genocide and to whom ethnic labels are supposed to mean very little or nothing, there are still those to whom, rather than provide answers, 'ndi munyarwanda' raises uncomfortable questions.

This dawned on me recently when I was invited to a Kwibuka conference at the University of Nairobi, which was organized by the Rwanda High Commission in Kenya.

It was an excellent gathering which left those who had gathered to mark the 25th anniversary of the genocide against the Tutsis with many take-aways, courtesy of the excellent line-up of speakers the High Commission put together.

'Ndi umunyarwanda' featured prominently in the presentations and subsequent conversations between the speakers and members of the audience, as one of the innovative strategies the Government of Rwanda was using to build a New Rwanda in which identity-based divisions would be confined to the dustbin of history.

At the end of the presentations and conversations, a young Rwandan, a woman in her early 20s, asked to speak to me. She was interested in what 'ndi umunyarwanda' "is intended to achieve" and whether it was intended to "create the impression that ethnic categories do not matter.

"What", she asked, "should parents tell their children who outside their homes are told that they are Rwandans, as they also hear that there are people called Tutsi, Hutu and Twa, if they come home and ask: 'who are we'?" It became clear to me that no explanation had been given to her concerning one thing: that 'ndi umunyarwanda' is not about denying the existence of categories let alone telling children that they do not exist, but about emphasizing that, regardless of what label you or anyone identify with, 'ndi munyarwanda' simply reminds you that you are as good as any other person and entitled to the same rights as they are, regardless of what label they or others assign them.

And so, I said to her: 'ndi umunyarwanda' means that the Hutus and the Tutsis are equal in the eyes of the Rwandan state. With a look of satisfaction on her face, she asked me: "how come no one has ever explained it to me the way you have done?"

Well, those to whom the duty to explain belongs must double or triple their efforts and neutralize the distortions according to which to be Tutsi or Hutu in Rwanda is illegal.