

Who Are We?

Successful countries – like human beings – must have a purpose for existence. As human beings grapple with the question “why am I here?” and get answers to them, they get a clarity of their own identity. They can clearly articulate where they are (in the process), where they are heading, and how they think they will get there. On the contrary, the failure to get clarity regarding why they are here can seriously mess up a human being by creating a maze of confusion regarding answers to that basic question about life. They get depressed because they feel they have lost a sense of purpose and direction in their life. They may wish to simply end it rather than continue living what they perceive to be a purposeless life.

Countries can get depressed, but can they commit suicide? Africa, for instance, has been depressed for much of its post-colonial period. Rwanda tried to take its own life in 1994. It didn't succeed and is now living with the scars; it is trying to heal and repair those wounds.

What's the source of the depression? The short answer is the identity crisis. The long answer is that there is an unsettled question regarding whether Hutus and Tutsis existed as ethnic identities before colonialism. One perspective says that indeed they did exist as a distinct ethnic group. Another is that they were a form of division of labor.

Most importantly, however, you are likely to interpret that question negatively or positively depending on your intentions. If you have negative intentions, then your interpretation will give emphasis that leads to the erosion of values that are held in common – language, culture, taste, aspirations – by both groups.

You are likely to emphasize nose length and when you can't find any other distinguishing markers because people have more

in common that what differentiates them, you will see the importance of creating an identity card.

Moreover, you will likely paint the Hutu as animus to the Tutsis (or the reverse) and arm them with narratives that reinforce this animosity. You create fictitious history to manipulate individuals in one group with suggestions that one's struggles with who they are, where they are going, and how they should get there is impeded by only one variable: the very existence of the "other."

Regrettably, those with negative intentions have dominated efforts to address the unsettled question. They have destroyed trust, compatriotism, and the ability to forge a sense of belonging that transcends hostility for the "other." They offer suicide as a suitable alternative to any positive interpretation of the unsettled question.

Dereliction of Duty

Under normal circumstances, it is the responsibility of society's education system to promote narratives that promote values held in common. However, our education system has never stepped in to interpret this unsettled question positively. On the contrary, it has historically been a theatre for reinforcing negative intentions; schools at every level acting as an incubator of the most extreme of intentions: genocide ideology. Surprisingly, even in the post-genocide period, the educated class appears to have chosen the option of "neutrality."

Whether this dereliction is by omission or commission is another unsettled question. At any rate, the neutrality of the education system – its failure to act as a tool for nurturing positive intentions in Hutus and Tutsis – is the reason for Ndi Umunyarwanda. It is worth repeating, perhaps for the historical record, that Ndi Umunyarwanda is playing the role that should have been played by Rwanda's education system in

general and its intelligentsia in particular.

This point was underscored by the First Lady, Ms. Jeannette Kagame, in her keynote speech to open the 12th annual Unity Club Forum, a grouping of former senior ranking officials and their spouses. “Ndi Umunyarwanda is a healing tool, a pact. It is a remedy to historical ills, it binds us together, and it is our shield. It is a contract to remain upright people and to build the country,” she said. Unity Club demonstrates that powerful voices – the intelligentsia, churches, business community, etc. – can come together to nurture positive intentions amongst Rwandans.

As [Frederick Golooba-Mutebi observed, the First Lady and other members of the Unity Club are not suggesting that there is anything wrong with being a Hutu or Tutsi.](#) Far from that. However, they are betting that the unsettled question regarding whether the Hutus and Tutsis were ethnic groups or a form of division of labor will increasingly become moot as long as both increasingly subscribe to a few more common values as opposed to the alternative choice of self-destruction that ruled the roost for much of post-colonial Rwanda.

Of course who we are and where we are heading is both an existential and civilizational question in the grand scheme of things. It goes beyond the sense of belonging to a community of Rwandans. This is why the First Lady implored Rwandans to think of themselves as “Pan Africans.” Therefore, transcending the Hutu/Tutsi straight jackets that people find themselves in would be only constitute a step in their right direction.

Will their efforts to bring clarity, purpose, and direction stitch Rwanda entirely back together, out of episodes of depression and self-destruction? Who knows. May be not in our lifetime. What if for the last 57 years the purpose for the

country's existence was to reinforce positive, rather than negative, intentions amongst Rwandans? Think about it.