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This research and presentation thereof considers the ritual umuganda *in terms of its contribution to national identity. In doing so, I consider the history of the ritual, its transformation in purpose over time, and the accompanying sociological consequences of such purposes and transformations. The evidence in this case includes sociological analyses of the* umuganda *ritual itself; political speeches which underscore the type of popular mobilization contemporaneously undertaken and/or accomplished and its purpose for such; recent media articles relating to* umuganda *(written by both citizens and outsiders and by both those with affirmative and negative opinions concerning* umuganda's *contribution to the Rwandan reconciliatory spirit and economy), as well as my own first-hand observation of and participation in* umuganda. *The available evidence demonstrates a strong correlation between participation in the ritual of* umuganda *and social and political mobilization in Rwanda's earlier historical periods in which the state effectively delineated and managed a nation-building project. In conclusion, I argue that the effectiveness of the current* umuganda *ritual is largely unsuccessful in relation to nation-building, as it does not achieve a high degree of unified social or political mobilization within the Rwandan population that ultimately contributes to an identification with a single national identity.*

Rwanda, the most densely populated state in Africa, has experienced internal trauma like few others, has been governed by various colonizing powers (Germany and Belgium, as well as being greatly influenced by France), and has been torn apart by a series of genocides following independence in 1962. Therefore, the Rwandan collective identity has both reflected past suffering and simultaneously attempted to suppress it in an effort toward progress, most notably through *umuganda,*[1] the mandatory, state-led public service

program (Straus 2006). However, the use of *umuganda* has changed over time, shifting its purpose and role in nation-building. Implemented as a mechanism for social and political mobilization prior to, during, and after the 1994 genocide, the current ritual must reinvent the former tradition in order to successfully create a new Rwandese identity with a collective past, present, and future, therefore not abandoning the old but rewriting its underlying purpose and redressing public perception. Within each period of *umuganda's* practice, I shall consider its purpose for implementation; the characteristics ascribed to and adopted by the participants; the benefit reaped and for whom – the state as a collective entity, particular political groups, and/or specific economic classes; and the ultimate success in wielding the ritual of *umuganda* as a nation-building instrument.

The purpose for practicing ritual and the manner of implementing it are commonly understood by political anthropologists as the foundation for nationalism, considering "nationalism an ideology, nation a collectivity, and nation-building a process" (Purdekova 2008, 10). Anthropologist David Kertzer (1988) delineates the importance of rituals in relation to the political, most specifically the way in which rituals exert power within society and upon the individual within society:

- Participation in ritual effectively and concretely provides a means for individual citizens to relate to the abstract concept of the state (and, by extension, to connect the local community to the center of state power).

- Further, this participation reinforces social cohesion and solidarity (with this solidarity achieved even without consensus among the group) and contributes to an individual's sense of belonging to a nation.

- The power of ritual is achieved not only through the surrounding social matrix but also through the intense emotional and psychological underpinnings that urge a sense of connection.

Craig Calhoun (1997), along with Kertzer, emphasizes social cohesion in his conception of nationalism but also notes the dynamic nature of the nation itself, with input and acceptance from both the state and the population as integral components to a stable and meaningful nation-building effort, and therefore also the importance of political legitimacy as granted by the people in furthering nationalism. Similarly, Crawford Young (1976) reflects both Kertzer's and Calhoun's emphasis on a shared sense of community in nation-building but also highlights the importance of a shared past and future in accomplishing such. Each of these contributions to the construction and conception of a nation will be demonstrated in analyzing the promotion of Rwandese nationalism through the ritual of *umuganda*.

Rwanda, unlike many colonized states, largely maintained its pre-colonial boundaries and institutions, having already existed as a thoroughly institutionalized state. During the colonial era, Rwanda's European colonizers "incorporated, and in some instances, reinforced, Rwanda's precolonial institutions into the colonial state, and versions of those institutions persisted into the postcolonial state" (Straus 2006, 207). *Umuganda* presents a prime example of this; pre-colonial and colonial Rwandese history contained similar community-centered, labor-oriented rituals. In pre-colonial society, the Rwandese state had several informal institutions of labor mobilization; the one most closely resembling the post-colonial *umuganda* was *uburetwa*, which called for every household to provide two days of labor (for every five days) to local chiefs, the local central authority. However, this labor ranged from community-centered, such as clearing land for cultivation, to directly

benefitting the local authority, such as watching over the chief's house by night (Straus 2006). The colonial powers, particularly the Belgians, integrated this tradition of public works projects along with facets of their labor law into a new colonial state project (Schaefer 2001). When the Belgians relaxed the number of days required for such work, they intensified labor mobilization and participation by requiring universal engagement (rather than household representation).

Umaganda was implemented as a post-colonial public works program during the Habyrimana government in 1974 and was introduced as a uniquely Rwandan policy while actually retaining many aspects of the Belgian model (Schaefer 2001; Verwimp 2003). From 1973 to 1994, President Juvénal Habyarimana emphasized his conception of the "true" Rwandan identity, influenced by his own self-association as a Hutu and his military background: a "true" Rwandan wants and has many children (as children are a source of production and protection), engages in agricultural production, and promotes the welfare of his or her community as well as the Rwandese state above his or her own individual welfare (Verwimp 2003). In accordance with these characteristics of the "true" Rwandan, Habyarimana introduced *umuganda* as a collective development strategy specific to Rwandese traditions, values, and culture and drawing exclusively upon Rwandan labor. Habyarimana continually declared the Rwandan nation's strength lay in its numbers but simultaneously recognized the consequential need for greater production:

> [W]e must reconcile two things, on the one hand, the more numerous are we, the stronger are we because we have more arms and more brains, but the more numerous are we, the more we have to produce for that population in order to have enough food, to have enough education, to have clothes. We must reconcile these two parameters: population and growth. (Verwimp 2003, 6)

Verwimp (2003) cites Hayarimana's doctrine of "Collective Works for Development" and his government's explanation of *umuganda*'s establishment, centered on political rhetoric concerned with nationalistic mobilization rather than historical accuracy: "The umuganda policy was presented as the re-establishment of an institution that had long existed in Rwandan culture but that had been suppressed by the colonial economy" (16). This manner of defining the origin of *umuganda* and promoting the ritual as a reaction to colonialism further fosters national identity with *umuganda* as a distinctly Rwandan tradition; however, the Habyarimana government's ability to claim such with disregard to the colonial influence on the *umuganda* policy demonstrates the pliable nature of ritual in a political context, as Wande Abindole notes in describing the frequent African integration of ideas and practices to present a new form in emergent governments (UNESCO 1990).

The Habyarimana government presented the *umuganda* public works program as central to economic development efforts due to the free labor exerted toward state projects, such as schools, roads, sanitation facilities, health centers, and anti-erosion ditches, but it was also key in promoting a single, cohesive national identity. In his political speeches, President Habyarimana repeatedly and fervently underscored the necessity of all Rwandans' efforts for the successful development of Rwanda through participation in *umuganda*, coordinated within each level of the government and in participation among the dominant political party MRND (translated from French, National Republican Movement for Democracy and Development).[2] Looking towards a future of a developed Rwanda for the new Rwandan, Habyarimana, with his emotionally-charged rhetoric, either presupposed or hoped to persuade others of two points in order to have confidence in *umuganda*

as a development project. First, there is a common conception of development among the Rwandan people. Second, there is a new, shared Rwandan identity to be promoted and protected with which the population self-identifies. If the population does not sufficiently uphold the aforementioned points, there can be little hope of sustained, dedicated *umuganda* service.

Perhaps understanding this, Habyarimana institutionalized *umuganda* as a highly repetitious ritual that was not blatantly mandatory through governmental statute but was implicitly so, initially through governmental coercion and later, once the ritual's power caught hold, through emotional, nationalist appeal. Further, Habyarimana's frequent and emotionally powerful rhetoric hastened the compelling transmission of the ritual's power and deepened its emotional resonance. President Habyarimana's speeches commonly made broad nationalist appeals that supported his own political ideology while simultaneously and complementarily attacking the conceived enemy of his new Rwanda nation:

> *Umuganda* – our collective work for development, that to the manual labor of everybody. It is inconceivable that we could do without *Umuganda*. A country is constructed by hands not by words! …The results obtained by *Umuganda*, its remarkable realizations that many countries envy us, constitutes the best proof that it cannot be separated from the progress Rwanda made in the last 10 years, that is an essential part of that progress and that is corresponds without ancestral values – to engage oneself – so that everyone, by individual effort, performs better in a collectivity always in progress. Each intelligent and honest Rwandan can see this.[3] (Verwimp 2006, 19)

President Habyarimana's political rhetoric thoroughly commended *umuganda* as a manner of unifying Rwanda through participatory labor – "'The one who refuses to work is harmful to society'" (Verwimp 2003, 19) – and appealed to the majority peasant population, defining and celebrating the "new Rwandan." Through this repetitious, participation-intensive ritual, laden with psychological and emotional heaviness due to the individual's abstract connection of his or her contribution to the development of the Rwandan state, citizens effectively conceive of themselves as part of a larger, cohesive community. In this way, *umuganda* under the Habyarimana government successfully mobilized the Rwandan population through a powerful, top-down nationalist program[4]:

> The fact that everybody was required to participate, peasants as well as administrators, workers as well as intellectuals, had an important role in the efforts undertaken to reach a general mobilization. Umuganda is one of the prime examples of a top-down policy with an appealing development image that was designed to use and control peasant labour, to oblige the Rwandan intellectual to do physical work, to give politicians discretionary power over labour and to indoctrinate the Rwandans with the regime's ideology. (Verwimp 2003, 19)

However, while Habyarimana's political rhetoric was overtly populist, declaring the purpose of *umuganda* universally beneficial in terms of economic development and the delivery of state services to the community, *umuganda* served to more fully address the elite economic and political interests, namely by fulfilling political goals and garnering greater political power for elites, rather than attending to the entire population's needs as promised (Verwimp 2006).[5]

Therefore, with the overwhelming majority of the Rwandan population not significantly or directly benefitting politically or economically from participation in *umuganda*, their continued participation in the ritual, particularly as it contributes to nation-building, must be explained in another manner rather than direct benefit. A type of Marxian theory can provide this explanation, as the ideas of the ruling class become those of the entire society (and contribute to a shared collective) and thus justify existing power differences (Kertzer 1988).

As previously mentioned, the government and especially the dominant MRND party (to which President Habyarimana also belonged) exercised ultimate authority over the organization and administration of *umuganda*, as seen in the following excerpt from a national development promotional document:

> Umuganda must be planned in order to reach its objective, developing our country by building the necessary infrastructure for its economy and allowing the new Rwandan to engage in his work. Because of this, it has to be oriented towards directly productive actions. In order to increase the development projects in the Umuganda framework, the mobilization and sensitization of the popular masses is necessary and the MRND offers the appropriate way to do this.[6] (Verwimp 2006, 20)

Therefore, the MRND had jurisdiction to – and did – present *umuganda* as a reaction to colonial institutions and projects, including off-farm labor, the introduction of formal education, and the monetization of the Rwandese economy (Verwimp 2003). As previously stated, this reactionary espousal served to appropriate for Rwandan nationalist purposes a practice and policy that had been effectively practiced by colonizers and to promote individual association of *umuganda* with the successful development of the independent Rwandan state. In addition, local politicians and administrators wielded remarkable discretionary power in fulfilling their duties to organize each week's *umuganda* (Verwimp 2003). For example, these leaders decided and approved which public works projects were undertaken as well as which persons may be excluded from their work responsibility; not surprisingly, those persons very friendly to the government could escape *umuganda* participation.

This phenomenon is curious when considering *umuganda* as a nation-building ritual. Previously analyzed evidence has suggested that *umuganda* effectively mobilized the Rwandan population to form a new Rwandan nation and that the Habyarimana government consciously used *umuganda* to do so. However, the MRND-granted *umuganda* labor waivers must be considered as either harmful to the nation-building effort or innocuous to it:

- Harmful: firstly, decrease participation and thereby damage the sense of participation toward a common goal by a shared community; secondly, detract from direct power over *umuganda* wielded by the government in the form of the organization and administration of the ritual also in the form of ideology.

- Innocuous: Conversely, if *umuganda*'s foundational purpose is nation-building, then such a waiver may be permissible and innocuous, as such persons certainly belong to the nation, though still counterintuitive to the development of the nation. However, if the purpose of *umuganda* is solely collective economic development, then such waivers for governmental allies would be inexcusable.

In addition, there is much debate concerning President Habyarimana's political rhetoric (and action) as either promoting unification and reconciliation between Hutus and Tutsis (Mamdani 2001) or as inciting conflict among them (Verwimp 2006). Furthermore, scholars debate the rhetoric glorifying the Rwandan peasant as easing class distinctions (or dissolving them completely) (Uvin 1998) or as exacerbating the Hutu/Tutsi dynamic (Verwimp 2006). As previously outlined, President Habyarimana frequently used inclusive language, such as *our, all, everyone, Rwanda(n)*, in reference to *umuganda* progress. Additionally, President Habyarimana blamed the "'feudal mentality'" that some Rwandans hold and condemned "'the one who refuses to work as harmful to society'" (Verwimp 2003). According to Verwimp (2003), both of these statements by the president likely were references to the professionally elite Tutsi and were understood to be such by his audiences. This, along with a series of discriminatory and violent actions directed against Tutsi citizens, provided a catalyst for the infamous 1994 genocide.

The post-colonial *umuganda* project's success in popular mobilization proved foundational to the subsequent genocide. Verwimp (2003) notes, "*Umuganda* gave the local party and state officials knowledge and experience in the mobilization and control of the labour of the peasant population" (p. 18). In a study conducted by Scott Straus (2006) to ascertain common variables between genocide participants and the significance of such,[7] two categories of his study were a perpetrator's state political party affiliation as well as his prior civic and state involvement. According to the gathered interview responses, previous *umuganda* participation constituted one of the strongest contributing factors to genocide participation: "some 88 percent of respondents took part in the program" (Straus 2006, p. 19). Straus does not, and cannot, determine if participation in *umuganda* predisposed genocide perpetrators to acts of violence; the correlation simply demonstrates that a large percentage of genocidaires had already engaged in an organized state-sponsored program.

Similarly to *umuganda*, the genocide effectively mobilized all sectors of the Rwandan population – urban and rural populations and all social and economic classes. Furthermore, according to Straus's interviews of detained genocidaires, many perpetrators equated murdering Tutsis with state-decreed policy and therefore complied with what they deemed state authority's orders, either fulfilling their patriotic duty or preferring such action to the feared consequences of refusal (Straus 2006). Most strikingly, national and local officials used the word *umuganda* in describing the genocidal killings to be performed both in organizational meetings within the government and in public forums, including on the radio (Verwimp 2006). The depth of this compliance and the consequences of such highlight the extent of the Rwandese government's ideological power; this serves in stark contrast to other contemporaneous African state models (Straus 2003). In particular, due to the extensive government presence, which effectively managed affairs on each level of society (especially on the local level), citizens understood and largely embraced their role to be played in relation to the community and to the larger Rwandese state, as seen through the efficient and thorough genocide mobilization.

The 1994 genocide highlights the successful advancement of Rwandan nationalism through *umuganda*,[8] as an institutionalized ritual demanding popular mobilization served as the foundation to fulfill the MRND's conception of the new Rwandan and the new Rwanda, in accordance with Habyarimana's ideology of a peasant's Rwanda, a Hutu defined and dominated nation. This special *umuganda* had the explicit purpose of systematically annihilating the Tutsi and dissenting Hutus – moderate politically or protective of

Tutsis – in order to promote the chosen "true" Rwandan identity. Through the nature of the organization and administration of *umuganda*, the state effectively mobilized the individual Rwandan on the local level for national action in the genocide. Moreover, the emotional appeal of the ritual of *umuganda* itself was heightened in the political context preceding the 1994 genocide, particularly with the nation being conceived of as an exclusive socio-ethnic group struggling for political, social, and economic resources.

With the genocide ended by the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), the transition led by RPF leader Paul Kagame, and Kagame then elected President, Kagame furthered the idea of a new Rwanda completely remade after genocidal destruction: one with a new government, new constitution, and in some ways a new culture.[9] However, *umuganda* presents an example of how this new vision is attempted with regard to Rwandan traditions and subsequently confounded. *Umuganda* retained much of its institutional characteristics but shifted its purpose to reflect the new state's values, with reconciliation and unity playing larger, more emphasized roles. President Kagame is actively implementing *umuganda* as a mechanism for unity and community engagement.[10] Furthermore, while the *umuganda* projects undertaken and the government organization for such are similar to those under the Habyarimana government, various aspects of *umuganda* administration and participation have changed: the frequency of participation (1 day per month); the introduction of themed *umugandas*, each with a chosen topic on which a local authority speaks; and encouraged public discourse. These changes seem to promote nation-building by fostering shared beliefs and building legitimacy for government; however, they do not address a key challenge and goal in the Rwandan nation context – reconciliation.[11] Kagame attempts to accomplish reconciliation through collective participation in *umuganda*: all participate towards shared development of Rwanda and thereby reconcile the old and build a new de-ethnicized nation. As Purdekova (2008) notes, this reconciliation strategy highlights the recognition of ethnicity as central to conflict in Rwanda; therefore, the government has directly sought to neutralize ethnicity in reconciliation efforts.[12]

Therefore, with reconciliation a key element to Rwandan nation-building in the post-genocide context, one must consider if the reconciliation efforts of various sorts are working. While there are differing opinions of the success of the reconciliation effort, reconciliation does not appear to be occurring based upon much of the available (and necessarily recent) scholarship as well as my personal observations. Therefore, the Rwandan nation's formation and growth is detrimentally impeded. While the causes for these failures are doubtlessly various and complex, two central reasons are (1) various factors contribute to segments of the population challenging the legitimacy of the Kagame government and (2) there continue to be schisms in the Rwandan population, which reinforce past conflict and thereby prohibit the formation of a unified Rwandan nation. First, the legitimacy of the Kagame government in nation-building is central for many reasons (as previously introduced by Calhoun), not only as it pertains to implementing *umuganda* as a tool for nation-building. While it is currently difficult to assess the degree of legitimacy the Kagame government is granted by the Rwandan population, various recent news articles and blogs would suggest there is little political freedom in Rwanda, and some perceive President Kagame as extremely corrupt (Kagire 2010; Umuhoza 2010). Because of the highly polarized historio-political climate in Rwanda and the manner of Kagame's ascendency to power, those who consider his rule illegitimate will deny his ideology and associated policies and likely refuse to participate in declared reconciliation measures, such as *umuganda*;

in this way, these persons would cease to identify with the Rwandan nation as Kagame is trying to create it. Second, the success of reconciliation is pivotal to the creation of a new and sustainable Rwandan nation; however, the assessment of reconciliation is currently difficult (more so than political legitimacy). While in Rwanda, I observed some events and attitudes that led me to believe strides are certainly being made, but that people still consider their identities Hutu or Tutsi before Rwandan.[13] As Benedict Anderson's conception of the nation as an imagined community highlights, the Rwandan nation (if one can call it that by Anderson's standards) has perhaps an insurmountable challenge of conceiving of a shared past, present, and future, as the Rwandese people continue to live in a past of power dynamics.

Endnotes

1   In Kinyarwanda – one of the official and most widely spoken languages of Rwanda – the word *umuganda* has been translated to signify different ideas; perhaps this simply reflects the translator's personal preferences, but it seems to further demonstrate a historical evolution in the conception of *umuganda* in relation to its social and political ideology. According to Verwimp (2003), the word *umuganda* signifies the type of wood used to construct a house, as the term was introduced and used in the Habyarimana regime. *Umuganda* also has been translated as "contribution" in a Rwandan newspaper article that issued suggestions for increasing *umuganda*'s usefulness within the community (New Times 2008). In an article including an interview with current Rwandan President Paul Kagame, the word *umuganda* is said to mean "we work together" (Rwanda News Agency 2010).

2   The MRND, while officially a political party (and the overwhelming majority political party at that time), achieved such power through subtle political maneuvering and attempts to subvert the political from the political sphere. While the MRND party was everywhere and truly authoritarian, the idea of the political polluted the Habyarimana scheme; therefore, "[e]very effort was made to forget – at least officially – that politics existed" (Verwimp 2006, p. 13). Further, during this period, there was little, if any, open political competition.

3   "Youth and Development," speech at President Habyarimana's visit to the National University of Rwanda, May 21, 1986.

4   Verwimp (2003) notes that *umuganda* attendance began to decline dramatically as the power of the Habyarimana government declined (19), or more specifically the rate at which the population subscribed to the ideology of Habyarimana government and its related nation-building project and granted legitimacy to Habyarimana government.

5   As studied in Verwimp (2003), *umuganda* and other economic policies undertaken in the Habyarimana government, including those relating population, education, food price, land, exchange rate, and the coffee and tea industries, consistently favored the traditionally more powerful economic player (the state-owned company, the whole-sale trader, the importer, etc.) at the expense of the individual producer. As economic conditions later worsened, political loyalty to Habyarimana (and by extension, participation in *umuganda*) dramatically fell. These conditions provided the setting for actions taken in the organization of the 1994 genocide.

6   L'Umuganda dans le Developpement National, 1998.

7   Scott interviewed 210 male detainees in fifteen central prisons over a six month period. This is the largest known study of perpetrators. He selected only sentenced detainees, reasoning that their testimony was already aired and recorded and their sentences determined and therefore they would have less incentive to lie; with this in mind, he only interviewed men as no women confessed to killing in the genocide, and those incarcerated for participation constituted a very small percentage

of the population. Lastly, he conducted all interviews in a private room with a Rwandan assistant who speaks Kinyarwanda. This man lived in Rwanda before and during the genocide and lost family in the genocide but is not associated with the current regime.

8   While highly successful, the 1994 genocide must be noted as clearly an extreme and highly negative manifestation of nationalism.

9   This new Rwanda was to be totally remade: new flag, new motto ("Unity, work, patriotism"), etc.

10   Further, in a Rwandan newspaper article interviewing President Kagame about the importance of *umuganda*, *umuganda* is translated as "we work together" (Gahindiro 2008). This shift in translation of *umuganda* itself seems to highlight a differing perspective in the purpose of the ritual and the value it brings to Rwandese culture.

11   The themed *umugandas* have not seemed to address topics of reconciliation but rather the collective action is hoped to address reconciliation; for example, one *umuganda* in which I participated while working in Rwanda in the summer of 2009 was themed around business cooperation and openness with the West.

12   For example, under Rwandan law, Hutu/Tutsi distinction and designation is illegal, as it hinders reconciliation efforts by furthering ethnic cleavages.

13   For example, the Kigali Memorial, the largest and central genocide memorial in Rwanda, was attacked in the night. According to a colleague who worked at the museum, these attacks are not uncommon.

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About the Author

Jaclyn Barnhart is a senior in the Chancellor's Honors Program at the University of Tennessee, majoring in Global Studies and Latin American Studies. A Neyland and Baker Scholar, she has studied in Ghana and Bolivia and worked in Kigali, Rwanda, in a microcredit bank assisting in a variety of projects. This research topic emerged through her experiences while living and working in Rwanda, in which she learned about the various challenges of post-conflict reconciliation that Rwanda faces. While in Kigali, she began working on developing a partnership between the Rwanda Presidential Scholars Program and the University of Tennessee and continues her work to have this partnership come to fruition. Jaclyn's passion for international and community social justice issues is demonstrated through her participation in various organizations, such as the University Assisted Community School project and University of Tennessee Model United Nations. She also was recently recognized for her international work and service in a focus article about the University of Tennessee's Ready for the World Initiative.

About the Advisor

Dr. Amadou B. Sall is currently teaching Introduction to African Studies and Environmental Education at the University of Tennessee. Since 2005, he has taken undergraduate and graduate students to Ghana for a two-week mini-term course. He was born in a small town, Bababé, Mauritania (West Africa). He was trained as a forest ranger and taught forestry at the National School for Agricultural Extension and Training in Mauritania. In December 1999, Dr. Sall graduated from the University of Tennessee with a Ph.D. in Education.