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Title

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Permalink

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Journal

Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies, 39(1)

ISSN

0041-5715

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Publication Date

2016

DOI

10.5070/F7391029818

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Historicizing Ethnicity and Slave-trade Memories in Colonial Africa: The Cases of Rwanda and Northern Cameroon

Willis Okech Oyugi

Historicizing contemporary issues in Africa, especially those that are partially rooted in the precolonial period, often present various challenges that include periodization, presenting a lineal account, and the dearth of written sources.¹ In general, however, the arbitrary nature of periodization reflects unifying themes and allows for effective historical reconstruction. Commonplace in Africa's historical reconstruction, for example, are the precolonial, the colonial, and the postcolonial time periods. Cataclysmic events such as the Rwandan Genocide of 1994 and youth-driven political violence in Northern Cameroon in the early 1990s are but two relatively recent examples of Africa's challenges that presented opportunities for thematic sequences and effective historical reconstruction. Manifested in both events were the growing social, economic, and political inequities of contemporary Africa that, though mostly rooted in the colonial period, had their genesis in precolonial Africa. European colonial intrusion and occupation played a central role in maintaining and exacerbating these divides.

Seemingly, for a continent that is often represented in popular media as being in perpetual distress, whether this is political, economic, or even environmental, it was no surprise that the Rwanda tragedy was initially simplified as evidence of the atavistic 'tribal' animosities that have bedeviled Africa for centuries. Eminent Africanists such as Jan Vansina in *Antecedents to Modern Rwanda* and Mahmood Mamdani in *When Victims become Killers* were nonetheless quick to challenge such simplistic renditions, and quite rightly so.² Both scholars convincingly linked the genocide to underlying socio-economic and political stratification that were mostly reified during the colonial period. Likewise, Nicolas Argenti's *The Intestines of State* examined how the advent of German colonialism in the late nineteenth century northern Grassfields of Cameroon contributed to the prevalence of domestic slavery

despite international abolition efforts. During this period, as was often the case at the height of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, the youth bore the brunt of the violence and brutality of the vice.³ These simmering tensions, rooted in precolonial Africa and exacerbated in colonial Africa, came to the fore in the early 1990s with devastating results.

This essay primarily focuses on the aforementioned texts by Vansina, Mamdani, and Argenti to examine the profound and lasting impacts that Belgian and German colonial rule alike had in Rwanda and Northern Cameroon. For both countries, the colonial incursion was a critical transition period where colonial administrations uncritically reified many African traditions. Contrary to reality, those perceived to be in positions of power were favored. In Rwanda, German and Belgian colonial administrators reified the ethnic divide that characterized the 1994 genocide by elevating the minority Tutsi as the purported natural rulers; in the northern Grassfields of Cameroon, elders manipulated their proximity to colonial officials to continue repressing the youth socially, economically, and politically.

This essay also reiterates why it has been incumbent upon Africanist historians to supplement the written history and knowledge produced during the colonial encounter using oral traditions and oral sources. Oftentimes, official texts favored African elites, not to mention the Europeans they collaborated with. Adopting a multidisciplinary approach by incorporating the use of oral traditions is no doubt invaluable, an approach that was primarily advanced in the 1950s and 1960s with the development of African history across universities in Africa, Europe, and North America.⁴

The essay first presents a brief review of how Rwanda's ethnic identities were constructed prior to the advent of German colonial rule. Particular emphasis is directed towards understanding how these assumed ethnic distinctions were primarily class-driven rather than being based on distinct languages *per se*. These identities, which were cemented during the colonial period, reveal that over the course of the last three centuries, those who identified as either Tutsi or Hutu considered one another as 'outsiders' with each asserting a claim to socio-economic and political superiority. The essay then analyzes the symbolism of masquerades and youth violence as a reflection of the social hierarchies in northern Cameroon and how power contestations between the

youth and their elders were historically linked to the traumatic slave experience. In both Rwanda and in the northern Grassfields of Cameroon, the knowledge produced during the colonial period sought to maintain the perceived status quo of traditional power relations.

An examination of power structures within many nations often reveals that whoever is in power tends to seek control of the production and dissemination of knowledge. More so, this has been the case when an impinging power endeavors to assert its social, economic, and political culture over another. Nowhere is this endeavor more evident than with the spread of European imperialism that began in the early sixteenth century with Spain and Portugal in the Americas and spread to other continents by the late nineteenth century, as the case was with Africa. Edward Said, for example, explored how global epistemic shifts during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries coincided with the expansion of European imperialism, largely for economic gain.⁵ Significantly, according to Said, the West in the post-Enlightenment period, particularly French and British (and American after World War II) academic work, missionary sources, travelogues, and other narratives, repeatedly represented their governments' colonial subjects as the 'other' while arrogating to themselves superior status in any socio-economic, cultural, or political comparison. With the rise of universities and their general regard as a 'purist haven', Said argued Western scholarship systematically influenced prevailing perceptions of non-Western people as the 'other'.⁶

Eminent anthropologist Bernard Cohn, who mostly focused on power relations between the colonist and the colonized in British India, also offered us a window to understand the political structures of colonial Africa. In India, Cohn demonstrated how Britain was able to assert and maintain its political stronghold over the subcontinent for over a century, arguing that

Systems of colonial control rested on knowledge, whether it was the knowledge of both the language and the culture that a missionary needed in Fiji to translate the Bible; the insight that a British official had in India to define landed property so that taxes could be collected; the understanding of local politics that a slaver needed in West Africa; or the sensitivity that an Indian

agent had to show in the Upper Peninsula or Michigan in order to “settle” Indians on their reservations.⁷

Certainly the control and production of knowledge in any society is correlated to its power structure. While Cohn discusses knowledge produced and controlled by colonial powers, Vansina explores knowledge production in colonial Rwanda, its storage, and its dissemination by a native royal power—the Nyinginya Dynasty. While this dynasty had been in existence prior to the advent of colonial rule, it had not been there for very long. Yet colonial officials came to view and treat it favorably. Africanist historians have thus found it incumbent to also take into account socio-economic and cultural diversities that were impacted by the colonial intrusion in much of their scholarship. These diversities exist even in relatively small nations such as Rwanda.

With his authoritative knowledge of the precolonial origins of the socio-economic and political diversities within Africa’s Great Lakes region, Vansina saw it fit to write *Antecedents to Modern Rwanda*. He was particularly concerned that much of Rwanda’s twentieth century historiography reflected a bias toward royal history. Based on an examination of oral traditions, he argued that much of Rwanda’s twentieth century history as taught in schools was a prejudiced history favoring the royal Nyinginya Dynasty. Vansina, in tracing the Nyinginya Dynasty’s origins to the mid-seventeenth century, refutes the commonly held view that the dynasty was an ancient royal clan. Instead, he attributed such misconceptions of Rwanda’s history to the fact that royal court ideologues had traditionally preserved the kingdom’s oral history. With the court historians reproducing a biased account of Rwanda’s recent history, accounts that would subsequently inform the development of Rwanda’s school history curriculum, a history that certainly favored the dynasty, one can easily understand why such misrepresentations of Rwanda’s recent history became sanctioned in literary text.⁸

In particular, Vansina adds, one cannot discount the biased influence of Abbé Alexis Kagame, acclaimed Rwandan historiographer, in his capacity as the historian of the central court during Belgian colonial rule. Kagame wrote several of Rwanda’s history textbooks, thereby singlehandedly reifying biased Tutsi elitism over the Hutu in the academia, since his historical accounts elated

all ruling clans in Rwanda as Tutsi. Seemingly understated in the lead-up to Rwanda's genocide is Kagame's influence in deepening the purported 'ethnic' wedge between those who identified as Hutu and Tutsi. These deep seated Hutu/Tutsi divides were already evident in the violent clashes that occurred during the 1950s and 1960s.

April 6 to July 18, 1994, in Rwanda will forever mark one of the cataclysmic events of the late twentieth century. Following the assassination of President Juvenal Habyarimana, 800,000 Rwandese—about ten-percent of the population were murdered in just over one hundred days. The assassination of Habyarimana, who proudly identified as a Hutu, came in the wake of political tensions between his government and Tutsi-led rebels seeking a power sharing solution. The genocide that followed witnessed ethnic-based killings and counter-killings. The Hutu militia, or *Intarahamwe*, who indiscriminately hacked to death their fellow countrymen, including any suspected Tutsi sympathizers, was politically and financially backed by Hutu soldiers, government officials, businessmen, and even the clergy. On the other hand, the Tutsi counter-revenge, which also contributed to over 300,000 Hutu deaths, was largely carried out by the Rwanda Patriotic Front, a financially and militarily well-organized rebel group that, for many decades, was based in neighboring Uganda and assisted by a Tutsi militia—the *Banyamulenge*.

There is no question that the Rwanda genocide pitted Hutu against Tutsi ethnicities. Yet, one may be left wondering why the Hutu and Tutsi would resort to such callous brutality especially given the fact that both ethnicities spoke the same *Kinyarwanda* language. The answer lies in the caste, or class distinctions central to understanding the assumed ethnic divisions responsible for the systematic slaughter and counter-slaughter in 1994. Just as had been the case in similar but less examined 'tribal' cleansings during the late 1950s and 1960s, Africans who had now adopted their Hutu and Tutsi identities sought ethnic exclusivity socially, economically, and politically. Exclusivity to Rwanda as the end-game, the elimination of the 'other', either through forcible displacement or total annihilation, fueled the indiscriminate slaughters and counter-slaughters. Colonial rule certainly fomented these ethnic distinctions, often based upon some assumed superiority complexes among those who had earlier identified as Hutu or as Tutsi.⁹

Vansina's critical historical analysis of the rise and dominance of the Nyinginya Dynasty over other 'great families' by the late eighteenth century is particularly insightful in understanding precolonial socio-economic and political stratification. As each family sought political dominance, many expanded their territories. In essence, Rwanda's royal ideology preceding the arrival of German colonialism was characterized by ruling family rivalries and power struggles. The most notable of these civil rivalries, to be discussed shortly, was from 1796 to 1801 that greatly empowered elite Tutsi families but also diminished the king's powers. He argues it was this civil rivalry that gave rise to a stratified and opposed social order based on Tutsi and Hutu identity.¹⁰

The Germans arrived in 1885 to find in place a semblance of a once powerful centralized and militarized state whose borders are aligned with those of contemporary Rwanda. But just prior to their arrival there emerged socially and economically inclined divisions that soon began to take on a political dimension. Subsequently when the Belgians, mandated by the League of Nations to administer Rwanda following the Treaty of Versailles of 1919, they, just like their predecessors—who had controlled "knowledge production"—ensured these recent dimensions that had only been a few decades in the making became reified racial categories as if they had been the traditional norm.¹¹

Historically, however, the Hutu and Tutsi identities were associated with socio-economic specializations, at times in response to ecological factors, which led to class stratifications. For instance, one of the common class differentiations based on cattle ownership and clientage inevitably became dominated by political superiority. Hence, Mamdani points out that Rwanda's ethnic divide correlated to the "changing economic and political identities" of the emerging Rwandan state of the seventeenth century.¹² These economic and political identities were still in place and continued as such even after Rwanda attained its independence in 1962.

Despite limited reliable archaeological data, Vansina writes that, ten thousand years ago, the original inhabitants of present-day Rwanda included hunter-gatherers in the west and agropastoralists who resided in the central regions. The latter cultivated several grains such as sorghum and millet and kept a few cattle. Additionally, these subsistence activities were

supplemented by metallurgy for personal use and trade.¹³ By 1000 AD, many states in the Great Lakes region were characterized by mixed economic specializations including agricultural and pastoral production. In time, however, economic specialization led to social stratification, with social classes taking precedence. These socio-cultural distinctions were overwhelmingly along a herder and farmer divide. Vansina points out that, from the seventeenth to the mid-eighteenth century, land disputes and recurrent droughts increased tensions that eventually morphed into the Tutsi and Hutu divide. Unlike in the earlier time period when the Twa hunter-gatherers had maintained stability regardless of dire ecological shifts, from the seventeenth century, pastoralists were advantaged over farmers during periods of drought since they could easily move their cattle to pastures afar. These seasonal migrations ensured them greater economic stability. But even as the pastoralists identified as Tutsi and the farmers as Hutu, exogamous lineages and inter-class relationships maintained fluidity between the two forms of subsistence livelihood.¹⁴

Notwithstanding the land disputes, economic specialization came to define political dominance in Rwanda by the eighteenth century. Pastoralists continued to be in ascendancy into the mid-nineteenth century when the Germans arrived. Vansina asserts these subsistence livelihoods eventually correlated Tutsi and Hutu with pastoralist and agricultural identities respectively.¹⁵ In contrast to Vansina, Mamdani disputes the common belief that all Tutsi were pastoralists while all Hutu were agriculturalists. He contends that, despite clear distinctions between the two forms of subsistence, evidence points to pastoralists and agriculturalists—as well as Twa hunter-gatherers in the rainforests to the west—supplementing each other and living in close proximity on the hilly Rwandan terrains all along.¹⁶ Indeed, both authors point out that the socio-economic boundaries were fluid and dynamic.

Through linguistic reconstruction, Vansina also characterizes the Nyinginya Kingdom as a centralized and militarized state by the end of the eighteenth century. Much of this centralization was attributed to Rujugira, who took power through a coup in 1770, and Ndabarasa, his successor in 1786. Both kings adopted *ubuhake*, a Tutsi herding metaphor that was manifested in the form of a cattle clientship contract. It was first introduced by Ndori, the kingdom's first founding father and used to maintain

their political standing. The system was an “an unequal contract between patrons and clients, in this case the king as the patron loaned cattle to their subjects for usufruct use but still maintained ownership rights to them.”¹⁷ The king, by offering military protection to those under his kingdom, essentially also obligated them into perpetual servitude. Given that the contract was hereditary, it could only be broken by the patron, who then demanded not only the cattle loaned out but also all of the offspring. Following the death of Ndabarasa, succession battles led to a civil war from 1796 to 1801 that resulted in the weakening of the king’s power while enhancing the political and socio-economic status of several elite families, mostly Tutsi. For the next eight decades, civil rivalries were common as these families sought territorial expansion until the power fell back to the king in 1885.¹⁸

Significant to the civil war of 1796-1801, however, as Vansina points out, the elite Tutsi families cemented the social stratification and expanded their political authority by using the tradition of *uburetwa* to specifically exploit the labor of those who primarily engaged in tilling the land. In contrast, herders and those in the military were exempted such exploitation. Scarcity of land during the expansion period meant that farmers were at the mercy of the pastoralists. Traditionally, *uburetwa* had involved “corvée laborers offering their services to wealthier land owners in exchange for food for instance in times of drought or in lieu of state taxes.”¹⁹ Thus, according to Vansina, the word *Hutu*, which implied ‘farmers’ also referred to an ‘outsider’ or subordinate as ascribed to them by the economically, socially, and politically dominant Tutsi elite. Vansina’s claim also affirms the ‘paradox of outsider’ complex: the Hutu identity became associated with an ‘outsider’ status conferred upon farmers who were economically dependent upon the elite Tutsi pastoralists.

This was the Rwanda that the German colonists found in the late 1800s. It was a state that was characterized by an increasing socio-economic and political divide that favored the Tutsi over the Hutu identity and one where the state’s royal court had lost much of its power to the land-hungry elite Tutsi families. Thus, the pastoral versus agricultural divide not only historically defines Rwanda’s ethnic identities, which then became politically entrenched in colonial and postcolonial times, but also reflects the paradox of outsiders.

In retrospect, Mamdani proposes that while the initial Tutsi—if they were known as such then—may indeed have emigrated from outside Rwanda, they initially did not regard themselves as either being outsiders, *per se*, or present themselves as politically superior. Rather, based on several oral traditions from the Abanyinginya and Abeega clans, he concludes that it was first the Tutsi elite families and, soon after, the colonists espousing the much discredited *Hamitic Myth* who reified their political supremacy as a given right.²⁰ According to one of these myths, political supremacy was not the exclusive domain of the monarchy despite the *mwami* or king exclusively being chosen from these two clans; indeed, from this origin myth, ‘Tutsi’ who alongside Kigwa was one of *nkuba’s* (thunder god) two sons, fell from heaven and settled on a Rwandan hill.²¹ Likewise, another myth involved Gatutsi, Tutsi’s nephew, and his two siblings Gatwa and Gahutu that supposedly explained social differentiation in the Abeega clan, including the faculty of anger, the faculty of disobedience and labor, and the faculty of gluttony. Yet, a third royal origin myth claimed that of Kigwa’s three sons, it was only Gatutsi who restrained himself from drinking milk each had been entrusted to watch over. From these three myths, Mamdani contends both the Tutsi monarchy and Tutsi aristocracy “claimed sacred supremacy rather than an alien origin.”²²

Not only were the last two origin myths analogous to the Eurocentric Hamitic hypothesis perpetuated by Europeans well into the twentieth century, but as Vansina also points out, to the Germans colonists, based simply on phenotypic features, the ‘elegant and tall Tutsi herders’ could only have descended from the Hamitic stock.²³ Mamdani also highlights the highly significant influence played by catholic missionaries. By the early 1900s, they were responsible for creating and maintaining Rwanda’s educational policies and therefore institutionalized the intellectual knowledge that charted Rwanda’s future. Father Leon Classe was the most prominent and highly influential among these missionaries. According to Mamdani, in 1902, Classe presented the Tutsi as “superb humans combining traits both Aryan and Semitic,” while Father Francois Menard in 1917 wrote that the Tutsi was a “European under a black skin.”²⁴ Based upon the influence of Father Classe, and other ethnographic treaties that relied upon the Hamitic hypothesis, Mamdani demonstrates that between 1927

and 1936, colonial administrators officially institutionalized Hutu and Tutsi ethnic identities within their social, cultural, and political policies. Politically, the Belgians tapped into the preexisting monarchy to maintain their indirect rule by using local chiefs and even imposing Tutsi chiefs in predominantly Hutu areas.²⁵

The Tutsi and Hutu ethnic divide was further entrenched and institutionalized through the colonial education system. Besides the missionary documents of 1925 and Kagame's major influence in the production of Rwanda's academic history, systematic subjugation of the Hutu majority in academia during early Belgian colonial rule was commonplace. The knowledge produced during this time ensured a perceived Hutu inferiority in comparison to the "Hamitic" Tutsi. For example, while the Tutsi were privileged over the Hutu by being taught in French, so as to groom them for future white-collar jobs, the Hutu were taught in Kiswahili, which was considered sufficient enough for blue-collar jobs.²⁶ Evidently, then, the institutionalized knowledge produced during the colonial period, as laid out by Said, Cohn, and Vansina, further reinforced the perceived differences between Tutsi and Hutu ethnicities. Kagame's influence on Rwanda's education system, coupled with colonial Belgium's institutionalization of knowledge production affirms a system of social differentiations that, not surprisingly, fueled mounting tensions and violence.

Yet while the Tutsi were privileged throughout the colonial period, the real precursor to the genocide, ironically, was marked by the so-called Hutu awakening or raising of Hutu consciousness from the late 1950s. The publication of *Bahutu Manifesto* in 1957 must have been disconcerting to the Tutsi political elite, and of course the Tutsi minority in general.²⁷ One of the architects of the text, originally published as *Notes on the Social Aspect of the Racial Native Problem in Rwanda*,²⁸ was Grégoire Kayibanda, who went on to become Rwanda's first president in 1962. For one who initially started out as a seminarist, Kayibanda rose to become chief editor of the influential Hutu-leaning church-based editorial before becoming the head of a coffee cooperative. Naturally, as a leading Hutu elite in a position of influence, Kayibanda and others in similar positions of influence championed for the rights of the Hutu people who had been marginalized throughout the colonial period. The publication of *Bahutu Manifesto*, however, was marked by extremist views that spread vitriolic propaganda

through print media and public radio against the Tutsi minority while elevating Hutu superiority status economically, socially, and politically.²⁹

Specifically, the *Bahutu Manifesto* became the Hutu parallel to Kagame's influence as a royal court ideologue. The Hutu elites used the manifesto to awaken Hutu consciousness or "Hutu Power"; and even adopted the Hamitic Hypothesis advanced by the Europeans, as taught in the school curriculum, to claim the Tutsi were 'outsiders' and as such should 'go back to their origins,' thus affirming the paradox of outsiders.³⁰ On the eve of Rwanda's independence, A. L. Latham-Koenig, a political analyst, warned of the potential for anarchy in the country given the recent shift in economic power that favored the majority Hutu, if recent events in neighboring Congo were anything to go by. In particular, he noted how the "introduction of coffee was revolutionary in another sense as well, since it freed the Hutu, now...a coffee-planter, from his exclusive dependence on the 'cow economy'."³¹

It is worth recalling that historically, economic power, under the *ubuhake* cattle clientship, maintained royal power. To a large extent the same could be said of Rwanda on the eve of independence. Although *Ubughake* was in place until it was abolished in 1954, the traditional practice had nonetheless been largely insignificant for much of the colonial period. The diversified, monetized economy, which was now primarily based on cash crops such as coffee and cotton had rendered it relatively impractical. This transition meant that a pastoral economy was never viable in colonial Rwanda. Naturally, many of the Hutu had continued to engage in farming and had easily taken up coffee although land much of the land was controlled by the Tutsi elite, hence the significance of coffee cooperatives that Kayibanda now headed in the late 1950s.³² Prior to independence it seems that in theory the balance of political power had progressively shifted from a pastoral to a farming (coffee) economy. But in reality, the Tutsi political elite still held power.

It is within this context that the emergence of Gregoire Kayibanda and the publication of *Bahutu Manifesto* should be understood. As he and others awakened Hutu consciousness and denounced Tutsi political, social, economic, and cultural monopoly, there was the recognition that for the Hutu masses, economic emancipation would propel their political and social

emancipation. During the 1950s and 1960s, politically-instigated and ethnic-driven killings were witnessed, leading to the hundreds of thousands of Tutsi minorities being driven out of Rwanda to live as refugees in neighboring Uganda and other countries.³³ For the next three decades simmering tensions and similar skirmishes continued, the genocide had been a long time coming. All of these divisions played out on the back of the recent colonial history where the assumed class divisions were reified.

The Belgian colonists, who mostly adopted the commonplace Indirect Rule administrative policy tapped into the preexisting Tutsi monarchy and Tutsi chiefdoms, thereby politically favoring the Tutsi throughout the colonial period. Conversely, the Hutu were marginalized politically. Yet Tutsi origin myths had inaccurately labelled the Tutsi as the legitimate rulers and therefore elevated them to be naturally superior to the Hutu. This historical inaccuracy reiterates Vansina's assertion that Rwanda's royal history favored the Tutsi. Obviously such biases highlight the unbalanced nature of oral histories produced by royal court historians; they reflect some of the issues that informed the debates surrounding the use of oral sources, for example, their validity and chronological strengths in reconstructing African history as the field developed in the 1960s.

In history, periodization is central in the quest to portray change over space and in time, of which absolute dating for many in the discipline is indispensable. Hence, the reason that critics of oral sources and traditions deem oral performances, especially non-verbal ones (as demonstrated by the masquerades in the northern Cameroon Grasslands), as unreliable and inadequate, if not totally unacceptable.³⁴ David Henige, for example, soon after Vansina and Bethwell Ogot laid out their separate historical methodological treatises based on oral sources and oral traditions, steadfastly questioned these sources chronological validity since oral traditions may be subject to individual or group bias and manipulation. In the absence of royal genealogies or supplementary written documents, for instance, Henige maintained that oral sources are inept at chronological dating.³⁵

One can certainly understand Henige's standpoint given, especially, Vansina's revelation of the bias of the Nyinginya court ideologues and Kagame's influence in Rwanda's academic history. Likewise, the non-verbal nature of the masquerades rather

than discursive expressions, may make it impossible to connect the present day youth performances to the factual ancient historical date. Still, we cannot simply discount, as reinforced by Argenti, the validity of oral narratives and oral performances in highlighting the *actual* historical injustices they represent.³⁶

Certainly for Rwanda's history, diverse traditions as Vansina reiterates, and rightfully so, must include official traditions as well as those preserved by rival clans and lineages. It is through a selection of diverse oral traditions that he, for instance, disputes Kagame's claim that the Nyinginya dynasty was an ancient ruling tradition. Vansina convincingly reveals from lineage and kinship traditions the ambiguities surrounding the foundation date of the Nyinginya dynasty. He further contends that the courtiers could have falsified the official royal records.³⁷ Still, oral narratives and oral traditions that have been passed down from one generation or from one person to another are chronologically historical.

The ubiquity of African oral traditions and their ability to continue informing contemporary societal beliefs remains a valid tool for Africanist histories. As Luise White reveals, African oral traditions often may contain general inaccuracies and inconsistencies. Yet despite these shortcomings, when taken at "face value," they still represent a way for "the historian to revisit the storytellers world."³⁸ In essence, for historical ethnography, in a past represented by languages and rituals, one may find it difficult to separate the past from the present.

Such is the case with Argenti in his retrospective historical account of youth suppression dating back to the trans-Atlantic slave trade which would, even after the trade's decline by the early nineteenth century, find a second life during the colonial period. In the latter period, German colonial palm-oil, cocoa, and rubber plantations in the south thrived on enforced labor, essentially slave labor, which the colonially imposed chiefs had been obligated to 'recruit.' Often those abducted from the northern Grasslands were male youth, although a few women and children were also 'recruited.' Likewise, during the trans-Atlantic slave trade the same youth, women, and children bore similar fates. Argenti thus not only sees in the ritualized masked performances how witchcraft idioms transform social relations, but also how they symbolize memories of the Atlantic slave trade that profoundly

impacted the youth who were sold into slavery by their elders to maintain their social hierarchical standing.³⁹

Trans-Atlantic and colonial slavery, which were equally violent and traumatic, were both marked by two dominant witchcraft idioms: *cannibal* and *zombie* respectively.⁴⁰ Both forms of witchcraft, sought to maintain the societal hierarchical status quo that advantaged the elders and elites alike. Argenti further contends that for the youth, the masquerades offered them a platform upon which they expressed and protested their societal subjugation. Subsequently, he correlates the history of youth exploitation and marginalization to the violent revolts by the *Union des populations du Cameroun* (UPC) in the 1950s and 1960s against the French colonials and independent Cameroon.⁴¹

Argenti analyzes and highlights the contradictions between witchcraft of cannibalism associated with the precolonial and the witchcraft of zombification that was common during the late nineteenth century to historicize the evolution of mysticism surrounding slavery. His analysis also vindicates the reification of a produced form of tradition by African elites during the colonial period. From the point of view of the coastal people, captured laborers were no longer disappearing across the sea in the south or in the “imaginary forests” of the Grassfields as they did during the trans-Atlantic slave trade.⁴² Although some of the former plantation laborers died from weakness and failure to integrate back into society, their return was evidence they had not been ‘eaten alive’ or cannibalized as was believed in the earlier slave trade period. Seemingly, under the new *nyongo* witchcraft, which “accommodated the changing economic environment,” those who “literally ‘reappeared’ became *revenants* or ghosts or zombies.”⁴³

Under this system youth had been doomed to toil on the German plantations as ‘supernatural’ slaves on behalf of their witch-owners. In reality, the witch-owners colluded with elders to appropriate youth surplus labor for economic gain. Additionally, in events analogous to the witchcraft of cannibalism, the known death of children in the plantations was attributed to close relatives scheming with the forced labor recruiters for economic gain. Subsequently, Argenti argues, the new “new zombie discourse in the south had to account not only for the alienation of the former plantation laborers but also for their continued, albeit liminal presence.”⁴⁴

But in the Grassfields, where the witchcraft of cannibalism had initially been promoted by the middlemen and slave traders to keep the communities' youth and children in perpetual fear, the new zombie discourse was adopted by the palatine elite to "justify abductions and later recruitment of youth for forced labor."⁴⁵ Hence, in the colonial-imposed market economy, African elites and elders amassed economic gain and maintained class and social hierarchies to their advantage by reifying the precolonial traditions and that were enabled by the German colonists who sanctioned the forced abductions.

Traditionally in Cameroon, and especially in the Oku province, men did not attain full adulthood status until marriage when they then established their own households. Argenti demonstrates that both during the trans-Atlantic slave trade and the colonial periods, the elders sought a perpetual subordination of the youth to ensure they maintained an upper hand in the competition for scarce women. The scarcity of women was as a result of the high rate of polygyny.⁴⁶ Additionally, whether for the sake of profit or seeking to pay off debts or even in their efforts to cushion against the high bridal wealth costs, elders, including respective uncles, were known to sell off their sons or nieces and nephews. Indeed, during the trans-Atlantic slave trade, "a majority of the slaves were not captured in times of war but as a result of complicity between slave traders and relatives to someone the latter 'had rights' to including children."⁴⁷

In any case, the proliferation of domestic slavery to provide labor for the palm oil plantations in southern Cameroon, despite Germany having arrived on an anti-slavery platform, echoes what Paul Lovejoy and other scholars have termed as the "slow death of slavery" in places like Northern Cameroon and Nigeria.⁴⁸ Despite the colonial period coinciding with the shift from trade in humans to an emphasis on agricultural products and manufactured goods, the colonists, upon realizing that the plantations could not survive without massive human labor did not hesitate to forcibly seek Africans to work for them. Resorting to coerced African labor through taxation and other means was a hallmark of the imposition and maintenance of European colonial rule. For many of these powers, despite their prohibitive administrative costs and a seemingly indifferent public at home, keeping their African colonies simply remained a matter of pride.⁴⁹

The brutality of the slave raids was worsened by numerous deaths that were associated with the long march from northern Cameroon to the plantations in the south, including forced starvation of the captives. Despite these atrocities, German colonialists continued to sanction enforced labor by subverting power hierarchies to benefit those chiefdoms that participated in the brutal raids against their neighbors. Former slave traders who resisted colonial intrusion or their local allies soon found themselves at the mercy of new slave raiders from the south. For instance, the Germans allied themselves with Bali chiefs who they rewarded for their raids on neighboring chiefdoms with captured women and children and assisted them militarily in keeping such vanquished kingdoms under Bali suzerainty.⁵⁰ By awarding them the women, the colonists were reifying the age-old tradition of elders selling off their youth into slavery to reduce competition for scarce women. Simply put, the colonial administrators not only sanctioned and profited from slave labor, but they also rigidified power hierarchies.

Argenti's critical analysis of the masked performances and the memories associated with rituals, witchcraft, and zombies to historicize the traumatic and violent past associated with slavery adds to the works of Vansina and other Africanist scholars who adopt oral traditions and histories in their work. For these scholars despite what may seem to be their everyday inaccuracies mystic traditions reflect the histories of those who experienced them.⁵¹ Accordingly, as Argenti argues, the masking ceremonies were a proto-revolutionary form in that they acted as a safety valve that "sublimates dissent into an acceptable form with the ceremonies acting as forums to allow the release of tensions and the negotiation of contradictions in society."⁵² He therefore contends that through mimetic appropriation, for instance, the ceremonial dances and spirit possessions exhibited by the masked performers symbolized the ritualization and seduction of power; walking corpses, like zombies, figuratively represented the slaves and coerced laborers who had been disposed of themselves by being alienated from their labor power.⁵³

Whereas people could question 'illegitimate' slave abductions during the precolonial period, the same could not be done in colonial Cameroon. The main distinction was because technically, the *fon*, or stranger king, having come from outside the area, and lineage heads were responsible for the safety of the community.

Just like they did in Rwanda, when the Germans colonized Cameroon they centralized power in the hands of these *fons* and lineage heads, oblivious to traditional power structures. Likewise, they imposed chiefs in some areas where none had ever existed before. With their colonial-sanctioned status, the *fons* and the elders did not hesitate to use their privileged standing to rid themselves of any dissenters or challenges to power. They even sought to enrich themselves in the market-based economy. Thus, masks provided immunity to dissenters who would otherwise have feared to speak openly for fear of facing the wrath of those in positions of power.⁵⁴

By focusing on the non-discursive symbolism of the suppressed youth, Argenti further vindicates the invaluable nature of African oral traditions and performances in reconstructing Africa's past. As opposed to the royal genealogies in Vansina's Nyinginya's *Antecedents to Modern Rwanda*, the masquerades were less likely to have 'archived'. Indeed, Rosalind Shaw's work among the Temne in Sierra Leone, just as it was the case with the Belgians and Alexis Kagame in Rwanda, reveals that archival sources written by missionaries and colonial administrators were often biased in favor of the elites while "displacing interpretations of the everyday (and often less verbally discursive) actions of ordinary people whose names are recorded only in the rarest cases."⁵⁵ Shaw further concluded that during the colonial period, despite their non-verbal characteristics, certain memories, embodied within them spirits of the 'forgotten' violence of the trans-Atlantic slave trade.⁵⁶ Shaw's work also adopts models of palimpsest memories to revise social theorist Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*. Unlike Bourdieu's emphasis on the reproduction of class inequalities as *continuities*,⁵⁷ Shaw's model includes embodiments of *discontinuities* and ruptures to represent the historical past.⁵⁸ Accordingly, to the Temne and the Oku youth of northern Cameroon alike, the violence they experienced during the colonial period was analogous to the violence their foreparents had experienced during the slave trade.

Nonetheless, to conclude, it is evident that oral narratives and oral traditions are invaluable sources for African historians. Given the colonial influence on several African traditions, especially their reification as official discourse, by colonial administrators and African elites alike, diverse oral sources provide a counter-narrative. Certainly, a methodological approach that adopts varied

oral narratives and oral traditions in addition to available written documents or archaeological data account for a more comprehensive understanding of the histories of Rwanda's ethnicity and Northern Cameroon's slavery respectively.

In Rwanda, both Mamdani and Vansina affirm the reification of Hutu and Tutsi ethnicities during the colonial period pertain to the solidification of social, economic, and political inequalities that played a central role in the Rwanda Genocide of 1994. These reifications played into the paradox of outsiders as each sought to rid the state of the 'other'. Additionally, Vansina reveals the uncritical reproduction of Rwanda's history that was biased toward the royal Nyinginya dynasty and that inaccurately made it analogous to the history of the Rwanda state. From linguistic and oral narratives, he attributes this partiality to the royal courtiers and the influence of Alexis Kagame. In particular, he exposes the latter's uncritical or knowing reproduction of questionable court documents that prejudiced in favor of the Tutsi against Hutu identities as official history.⁵⁹

Likewise, Argenti's critical analysis of the non-discursive masked performances in the northern Cameroon Grassfields enlightens our understanding of the unspoken violence and brutality surrounding the history of slavery during the trans-Atlantic and colonial periods. He demonstrates the systematic oppression and suppression of the youth by their elders and lineage heads who sought to maintain social hierarchies to their cultural advantage. During the trans-Atlantic slave trade era the abduction of youth and their sale into slavery was partly linked to the elders who, with the scarcity of women around, sought to secure extra marriages.⁶⁰ In the colonial period, in the guise of maintaining cultural traditions, the elders and political class relied on centralized power to promote class divides. The privileged amassed personal wealth at the expense of the youth who they subjected domestic slavery for colonial plantations in Duala, while rival ethnic groups were equally subjected to enforced labor recruitment and their land appropriated in their absence.⁶¹ The irony of such manipulative ventures was that it contradicted the initial "antislavery rhetoric" championed by Germany in its rationale to annex the northern Cameroon Grassfields during the Berlin Conference of 1884.

In essence, just as the colonial period in Rwanda reified the solidification of Tutsi socio-cultural and political superiority,

in northern Cameroon, the elders and political class sanctioned youth suppression. As a result, these institutionalized hierarchies, the rigidified ethnic divide attributed to German and Belgian colonial rule in Rwanda and the curtailed aspirations of youth to address centuries of social, economic, and political inequalities in the northern Cameroon Grassfields became grounds for violent dissent in the 1990s. Exploring the histories of these simmering tensions that culminated into the Rwanda genocide and the youths' violent protests in Cameroon is not only imperative to understanding these specific events but perhaps similar ones that span the precolonial through colonial Africa.

Notes

¹ See e.g. John E. Philips (ed.), *Writing African History* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2005).

² Jan Vansina, *Antecedents to Modern Rwanda: The Nyinginya Kingdom* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2004); Mahmood Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers: Colonialism, Nativism, and the Genocide in Rwanda* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001). Also see Frederick Cooper, *Africa since 1940: the Past in the Present* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 1-9; David Anderson, *Histories of the Hanged: Britain's Dirty War in Kenya and the End of Empire* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company Inc., 2005), 10-13. The latter reveals how class hierarchy among the Kikuyu during the Mau Revolt often defined those who cooperated or resisted with the colonial government, contrary to the common perception that the Kikuyu all united against the British.

³ Nicolas Argenti, *The Intestines of State: Youth, Violence, and Belated Histories in the Cameroon Grasslands* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007); Rosalind Shaw, *Memories of Slave Trade: Ritual and the Historical Imagination in Sierra Leone* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press), 9. Shaw also argues that in Sierra Leone, memories of the Atlantic Slave Trade affected socio-economic and political relations into the postcolonial period.

⁴ See e.g. Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology*, trans. H. M. Wright (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1965); Bethwell Ogot, *History of the Southern Luo: Vol I, Migration and Settlement, 1500-1900* (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1967).

⁵ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 3.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 3-8; 23-26; 134.

⁷ Bernard Cohn, "Toward a Reproachment," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 12, no.2 (1981): 231.

⁸ Vansina, *Antecedents*, 8.

- ⁹ On colonialism and ‘tribal’ ideologies see e.g. Archie Mafeje, “The Ideology of ‘Tribalism,’” *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 9, no.2 (1971): 253-261; Leroy Vail, “Ethnicity in Southern African History,” in *Perspectives on Africa: A Reader in Culture, History, and Representation*, eds. Roy R. Grinker and Christopher B. Steiner (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1997), 52-68.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 134-135.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*
- ¹² Mamdani, *Victims*, 51-56.
- ¹³ Vansina, *Antecedents*, 16-20.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 23-25.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 134-135.
- ¹⁶ Mamdani, *Victims*, 51.
- ¹⁷ Vansina, *Antecedents*, 47.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 136.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 131.
- ²⁰ Mamdani, *Victims*, 80-82.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, 79.
- ²² *Ibid.*, 80.
- ²³ Vansina, *Antecedents*, 3; 179.
- ²⁴ Mamdani, *Victims*, 87-88.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, 34.
- ²⁶ Mamdani, *Victims*, 89-90.
- ²⁷ L. Latham-Koenig, “Ruanda-Urundi on the Threshold of Independence,” *The World Today* 18 no. 18 (1962), 288-295
- ²⁸ See e.g. excerpts in Gérard Prunier, *The Rwanda Crisis: History of a Genocide* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 45-46.
- ²⁹ Mamdani, *Victims*, 191-192.
- ³⁰ Peter Uvin, *Aiding Violence: The Development Enterprise in Rwanda* (West Hartford: Kumarian Press, 1998), 30-31; Mamdani, *Victims*, 34.
- ³¹ Latham-Koenig, 289.
- ³² Mamdani, *Victims*, 191-192.
- ³³ *Ibid.*
- ³⁴ David Henige, *The Chronology of Oral Tradition: Quest for a Chimera* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974); Henige, “Oral Tradition as a Means of Reconstructing the Past,” in John E. Philips (ed.), *Writing African History* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2005), 169-190; Jan Jansen, “Narratives on Pilgrimages: Beauty versus History in Mande Oral Tradition,” in *Sources and Methods in African History: Spoken, Written, Unearthed*, eds. Toyin Falola and Christian Jennings (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2003), 249-267.
- ³⁵ Also see Vansina, *Oral Tradition* and Ogot, *The History of the Southern Luo*.
- ³⁶ Argenti, *Intestines*, 12-13. Argenti’s criticism of early social anthropologists did not consider dance and performance as valid for ethnographic study. See [cf is for comparison Alfred Radcliffe-Brown, *The Andaman Islanders: A Study in Social*

Anthropology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1933), on similar inaccuracies where “mythic charters and rituals are not sources of accurate historical information since they tended to privilege immediate ruling dynasties.”

³⁷ Vansina, *Antecedents*, 196-199.

³⁸ Luise White, *Speaking with Vampires: Rumor and History in Colonial Africa* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000), 4-5.

³⁹ Argenti, *Intestines*, 3-4.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 59-63.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 56.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 105-106.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 114.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 115.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 46-49.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 107-108.

⁴⁸ See e.g. Paul Lovejoy, *Transformations in Slavery: A History of Slavery in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 160.

⁴⁹ See e.g. Harry R. Rudin, *Germans in the Cameroons 1884-1914: A Case Study in Modern Imperialism* (London: Jonathan Caper, 1938), 316.

⁵⁰ Argenti, *Intestines*, 95-98.

⁵¹ See e.g. Bethwell Ogot, “The Construction of Luo Identity and History” and Luise White, “True Stories: Narrative, Event, History, and Blood in Lake Victoria Basin,” both in Luise White, Stephan Miescher, and David Cohen (eds.), *African Words, African Voices: Critical Perspectives in Oral History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 31-52; 281-304.

⁵² Argenti, *Intestines*, 11-14.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 119-120.

⁵⁵ Shaw, *Memories of the Slave Trade*, 9.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 53-55.

⁵⁸ Shaw, *Memories of the Slave Trade*, 5.

⁵⁹ Vansina, *Antecedents*, 5.

⁶⁰ Argenti, *Intestines of the State*, 96.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 92-94.