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Linguistic Portrayals of Conflict and the Inaction of the International Community: The Case of Rwanda

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KATIE COWAN, FEB 10 2008

Since 1990, the proliferation of intrastate conflicts has produced an important question: what influences the choices of the international community when it comes to intervention? Using theories of cognitive consistency and identity, this discussion seeks to understand the impact of how a conflict is portrayed on the decision to intervene. To illustrate its impact the discussion analyses the inaction of the United Nations in the face of the 1994 Rwandan genocide. Through the study of media presentation and United Nations reports, the Rwandan example supports the hypothesis that the more an African conflict is presented in the language of tribalism, the less likely it is that the international community will intervene.

Since the end of the Cold War, the proliferation of violent intrastate conflict has represented a state of affairs that is a far cry from the golden 'New World Order' heralded after the fall of the Berlin Wall.[1] Along with this development has come a renewed propensity for intervention in intrastate conflicts by members of the international community. However, since 1990, the decisions to intervene in certain conflicts and not others have produced an important question: what influences the likelihood of intervention by the international community in intrastate conflicts? Aside from the obvious influence of a state's national interests, this discussion analyses the influence of the manner of portrayal of conflicts on the decision to intervene. Looking at African conflict and at the 1994 Rwandan genocide in particular, this discussion seeks to explain, at least in part, how some African conflicts involving the worst human rights atrocities can receive little material response from the international community.

Theory

Analysis of this question requires an investigation into the theoretical processes behind it. There are two principle elements of theory here, the first of which is the psychological notion of 'cognitive consistency'. This is the action taken by the brain to assimilate incoming information with existing beliefs and expectations. According to Robert Jervis, "We ignore information that does not fit, twist it so that it confirms, or at least does not contradict, our beliefs, and deny its validity." [2] To put it another way, it is common for pre-existing beliefs about a person, nation, conflict or interaction to influence – and often distort – our interpretation of new information about that thing.

Richard Herrmann points out that assumptions commonly underlie attitudes that affect foreign policy considerations.[3] For example, American Secretary of State John Foster Dulles would accept without question any information that supported his belief – evidence of economic failure in the USSR – but required a wealth of information before he would take seriously information that went against those views.[4]

Africa is a frequent victim of this process.[5] The word 'tribal', which is so often associated with Africa, is usually used negatively; it implies a lack of civilisation, a reliance on aggression and base urges, and the existence of long-standing, identity-related feuds.[6] Saying that a conflict is tribal or ethnic automatically attributes to it a hopeless quality. Its use to describe a conflict can preclude further, more reality-based understanding of the conflict, a process that, unfortunately, plagues Africa.

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Conflicts described as tribal are therefore often subjected to the assumption that success from any potential intervention is unlikely, which is an indication of what influences decisions to intervene in one country and not another. Just War theory is explicit in the criteria required to intervene or wage war in the context of humanitarian intervention, including in those criteria a high likelihood of success.[7] The cognitive consistency processes that follow from the use of words like 'tribal' – these can include 'African' in the context of conflict – mean that it is easy to write off a conflict as hopeless without proper understanding. And, when a conflict is perceived as hopeless, it is nearly impossible to get any substantial support for intervention underway.

The other process related to choices of intervention concerns the identification of difference in international relations, or ingroup/outgroup theory. In a discussion of the effects and power of bureaucracy, Michael Barnett details how much of a part identity and the ability to identify with a group, people or nation plays in the determination of policy. He finds that bureaucrats use identity markers to decide who will receive their attention.[8] Or, as Michael Herzfeld puts it, "Compactly expressed...indifference is a rejection of those who are different." [9] To invert that, indifference is produced from recognition of difference.

For the most powerful member of the United Nations, the United States, nothing is more alien than 'tribalism'. It is non-progressive, it is uncivilised, it is unreserved, and it is difficult to relate in whole or in part to the modern American way of life. This is aided by a persistent trend in the western media to depict Africa as a desolate, poverty-stricken place.[10] Likewise, reports on African conflicts have a uniform quality. Richard Reid likens reports on current conflicts in Africa to the pre-twentieth century descriptions of African conflicts as largely pointless, savage tribal warfare.[11] The conclusion of a study of American impressions of Africa by Dennis Hickey and Kenneth Wiley was that "... [these] distortions still persist, even among the educated and informed, and particularly within the highest councils of power where they continue to have their greatest practical significance." [12]

It is possible to see how these two theoretical elements may be linked. We know that our pre-existing expectations about a region such as Africa affect our ability to interpret new information about that region, and second we know that Africa is persistently portrayed as a backward, tribal, uniform place. When examined in light of Barnett's and Herzfeld's propositions – that indifference is the rejection of difference – it is easy to see that a perception of difference surrounding Africa and its various conflicts has a negative influence on an international actor's decision to intervene. To put this as a hypothesis, the more an African conflict is portrayed as 'tribal', the less likely it is that the international community will intervene.

The Case of Rwanda

A study of the international reaction to the Rwandan genocide in 1994 lends credence to this hypothesis.

On October 1, 1990, the Tutsi-dominated Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) invaded Rwanda from their exile in Uganda, setting off a civil war with the Government of Rwanda. In August 1992, after almost two years of fighting, the RPF and three opposition parties sought to negotiate a peace agreement. This would become known as the Arusha Accords, signed in August 1993. The post-Cold War wave of democratisation that was sweeping through the third world had arrived in Rwanda; the Accords detailed a multi-party representative government. The United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda (UNAMIR) was sent to Rwanda to aid the implementation of the Accords, with Roméo Dallaire as its commander.

The Accords were not received well by many in Rwanda, not least the government itself. For them, and the extremist group Hutu Powa that supported them, the question of a multi-party system was not a question of giving everyone the same rights but of the Tutsi trying to regain power.[13] During the two years before the beginning of the genocide, Hutu Powa began systematically distributing weapons and spreading propaganda about the Tutsi via the Radio et Television Libres des Mille Collines (RTLM). The genocide would be systematic, planned, and had nothing to do with 'ancient warfare' or tribal inclinations.[14]

By 1994, tensions were high. High enough, in fact, to provoke Commander Dallaire to send a fax to the UN headquarters in New York warning that he knew of weapons stockpiles. It was only January, but Dallaire was already

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predicting widespread massacres of Tutsis.

On April 6 1994, Rwandan President Juvénal Habyarimana's plane was shot down – an act attributed to the RPF – and he was killed. Almost immediately, there was a nationwide call to arms from Hutu Powa to begin the slaughter of Rwandan Tutsi. Spread over the propaganda radio station, the message was clear: it was time for the Tutsi in Rwanda to be wiped out.

The political nature of the conflict is demonstrated by the fact that the first to be killed were the moderate Hutus who had signed or supported the Arusha Accords. Killings of Tutsi, also, spread fiercely through the country. Later an investigation into the genocide would find that 54.7% of the killings were completed by hand, using machetes or clubs. Only 14.8% were killed with firearms, which was significant given the international response to come. Many of the remaining deaths were people who had been forced to kill themselves or kill others.[15] The massacres were carried out by the Presidential Guard, but also by groups of young Hutu men who called themselves the *interhamwe* (those who go together).

Soon after the torture and mutilation of ten Belgian troops by a Hutu militia, Belgium withdrew its contingent from UNAMIR, reducing the latter's numbers considerably. Dallaire made pleas to the UN for backup, detailing exactly what he needed to avert a quickly-escalating genocide. He believed the massacres could be prevented if the genocidaires knew there was a significant international force ready to come in and stop them.[16] However, on April 15 the *New York Times* described Rwanda as an "uncontrollable spasm of lawlessness and terror". Linda Melvern states the effect of this description: "No member of the UN with an army strong enough to make a difference was willing to risk the lives of its troops for a country in such a state." [17]

On April 21, after much debate and at the insistence of the United States, the UN passed a resolution to reduce UNAMIR's presence in Rwanda. Dallaire sent twice-daily reports of the carnage he was seeing, but the UN was slow to respond and, again with pressure from the United States, did very little to help him. On many occasions it was said that there was no way to stop the killings.[18] On May 17 an intervention force was authorised, but with several conditions that meant it arrived in Rwanda three months after the end of the genocide.[19]

On July 20, the RPF, having advanced right into Kigali, called a unilateral ceasefire. It was in power the next day. Almost a million people had been killed, and several hundred thousand more displaced.

To Support a Hypothesis

The significance of Rwanda in the context of this hypothesis is that the conflict was not a tribal one. The conflict was not even initially along ethnic lines, but was 'ethnicised' by the government and Hutu Powa. Hutu and Tutsi are two groups of people that, until the arrival of colonial powers, defined themselves along socio-political lines. The minority Tutsi were the rulers, mostly because they owned the majority of the cattle, but their rule was not exclusive. Some Hutu were involved at the lower levels of authority, and it is well-documented that the two groups' definition depended on the definition of the ruling power at any given time.[20] Also, there was limited social mobility between the two groups; it was possible to move from one to the other. This is not a characteristic of racial distinctions. Before the arrival of colonial powers, the two groups exhibited none of the mass violence associated with tribes. When the Belgians arrived, they associated the lighter skin of the Tutsi with the lighter skin of the morally-superior European, and elevated the Tutsi on the basis of race. Distinction between the two groups and their members was thus not racial, tribal, or even ethnic, but was a socio-political distinction racialized by the Belgians.[21]

It was an economic crisis, due to a fall in the price of coffee – Rwanda's main export – in the late eighties that changed the political dynamics in Rwanda. The economic problems, in conjunction with a western push for democracy, represented enormous threats to the government's power. Desperate to remain in power, the government sought a way to disempower the Tutsi. It became clearer to the Hutu that the answer to the problem of democracy and a multiparty system was to wipe out the other side. Hutu Powa, an extremist group that was popular before the Habyarimana government, was brought back from obscurity.

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As Johan Pottier describes it, the government exploited the fear and desperation of a poor Hutu population and created a new enemy. "As elsewhere in Rwanda, and in the Great Lakes region generally, the authorities redirected hatred and potential violence of the poor – especially of angry, desperate young Hutu men – away from the rich and onto 'the Tutsi', the latter wrongly-portrayed as invariably aristocratic and privileged." [22] Via the radio Mille Collines, Hutu Power spoke of Tutsi desires to take over Rwanda, including Hutu land, and of how the Tutsi would kill Hutu if the Hutu did not kill them first. Thus a conflict over power or political control was redefined and fought along ethnic lines.

Nevertheless, Western media in Britain and the United States persistently reported on the 'tribal conflict in Rwanda'. This is the first evidence of cognitive consistency. As Michael Barnett puts it, "This was Africa, after all." [23] The tendency of reporters to write according to pre-existing notions about regions or ideas is a phenomenon actively encouraged by their editors. George Aliagh of the BBC calls it 'the template', a requirement that stories fit into the box of existing beliefs about something. [24] This is why it is so difficult to make information that does not fit in the box heard, and why western perceptions of Africa as poor, diseased and tribal are so ingrained. [25]

It is an interesting demonstration of this process to look at the way one newspaper, the *New York Times*, reported on the conflict. The *New York Times* was one of the institutions that chose to swing attention onto the evacuation of nationals and away from the killings, but its early reports are ready examples of cognitive consistency, and an effortless articulation of Rwandans as 'others'. The following are excerpts from one report, published April 11 1994. All emphasis is added.

"Deaths in Rwanda Fighting Said to Be 20,000 or More – **Tribal** Violence Reported to Be Slackening

BUJUMBURA – Burundi, April 10 – As fighting between **rival tribal factions** in neighbouring Rwanda appeared to slacken today, relief workers in Kigali, the capital, estimated the death toll from four days of **ethnic warfare** and reprisal killing at more than 20,000.

Even as hundreds of Americans, French and other foreigners were evacuated by land and air from the blood-stained city, **the scale of the carnage the Rwandans have inflicted upon one another** became clear. They described streets and alleys lined with corpses, **many of them horribly mutilated, in this lush, green city**, which had a population of 200,000 before the fighting began.

... According to Reuters, **the streets were still filled with gangs of young men, many of them soldiers and many of them drunk**, wielding an assortment of knives, machetes and other weapons.

... Rwanda was plunged into **terror and chaos** on Wednesday, when an airplane carrying the Presidents of both Rwanda and Burundi, neighbouring **small and poor central African nations**, crashed in Kigali. **The incident ignited one more round of the tribal bloodletting that has plagued this part of Africa for centuries.** [26]

From reading an article like this one, one could conclude that Rwandans are drunken savages who inflict carnage on each other for no real purpose. Furthermore, one could conclude that Rwanda was routinely chaotic, with gross violence a staple diet. Indeed, many did conclude that. It is striking that the reporter has used words like 'warfare' instead of 'fighting', 'wielding' instead of 'armed' and 'tribal factions' instead of ethnic groups. All are evidence of the process of cognitive consistency, linking preconceptions of the way 'Africans' conduct themselves in conflict to the conduct in a present conflict. Similarly, the article's portrayal of Rwandans goes a long way toward distinguishing them from Americans. The lack of order and civilisation, as it is presented here, could not do more to make up a picture of Rwandans as alien.

Misrepresentations of the situation like this in the press were mirrored, if less evocatively, in the United Nations. The interim Rwandan government's foreign minister, who also spoke of the conflict to the UN tribal terms. "The hatred that is erupting now," he said, "was forged over four centuries of cruel and ruthless domination of the Hutu majority by the haughty and domineering Tutsi minority." [27] It is clear now that this was not the case, but it did fit with what the west had come to expect from African conflict.

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Also, while there is no evidence to suggest that the Secretariat deliberately misinformed the Security Council at any time, there was a “chasm” between Boutros-Ghali’s reports to the Security Council and the reports he received from Dallaire every day.[28] The permanent members of the Security Council were largely reliant on the Secretariat for information about Rwanda and recommendations on how to respond, since no-one had solid independent sources of information about Rwanda.[29] Despite Dallaire’s insistent reports that the conflict was ethno-political, and was planned and systematic, the Secretariat were persistent in relaying to the Security Council that the conflict was chaotic, and based on longstanding hatreds.[30]

This had two effects. First, it made the conflict more alien than it already appeared to western powers, who do not generally engage in disorganised warfare, and second it automatically instilled feelings in those considering intervention that the conflict was unstoppable. This is significant, because it reinforces both features of tribalism: difference and intractability. Likewise, despite Dallaire sending a detailed description of the reinforcements he required to halt the killings, and despite clear evidence that the genocidaires were killing by hand much more than with firearms, still it was maintained by various authorities that there was no way to intervene.[31] “In the minds of many, the Rwandan holocaust was simply African tribalism rearing yet again its atavistic head.”[32] There was no way to accept that a tribal conflict could be stopped.

The processes of cognitive consistency and indifference to the ‘other’ are important influences on the outcome of foreign policy. In Rwanda we can see how stereotypes distanced the world’s most powerful government from an obligation to intervene, and how that inaction resulted in the prolonging of a genocide. The example of Rwanda supports the hypothesis that the more an African conflict is portrayed as tribal, the less likely it is that the international community will intervene. One can only hope that an awareness of this will go some way toward preventing unnecessary reluctance to intervene in similar conflicts in the future.

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Written by: Katie Cowan
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About the author:

I'm in my fourth year of a Law and Politics double degree at the University of Canterbury in Christchurch, New Zealand. My particular interests in IR are discourse analysis and identity politics, but I enjoy a good discussion about pretty much anything related to the discipline!