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The Decline of the Cattle-contract in Rwanda: A Cause and a Symptom of Conflict

Danielle Gauthier

INTRODUCTION

The conflict in Rwanda from beginning in the middle of the twentieth century, and that which culminated in the death of nearly a million individuals in the spring of 1994 is commonly understood to be the result of tensions between two tribal groups. However by examining social structure in Rwanda prior to Belgian rule, the situation becomes infinitely more complex and revealing. It was not the case that Hutu and Tutsi were separate societies, rather social structure in Rwanda was the frame for a network of reciprocal relationships. This social structure secured the Tutsi monopoly on social and political power, meanwhile providing that those with less wealth and power might still obtain access to them through association with those who had it. So, barring a lengthy discussion of Belgian complicity in the present conflict, the result of the unequal distribution of powers displaced from their ideational contexts provides an interesting case for an anthropologist interested in identifying the functional aspects of social structure. By clarifying the details surrounding the cattle-contract in Rwanda, as well as the social structure in which this is made possible, it comes to light that the decline of this social form is simultaneously a cause and a symptom of the tension between Tutsi and Hutu, and that the conflict cannot be viewed as a case of tribal warfare, but rather as a product of the dysfunction between two castes in a single society.

In Lemarchand's analysis of the "mythical axis" of Rwandan society, he identifies three recurring themes that are key in understanding Rwandan culture prior to colonization - the first being that the caste structure was divinely ordained (1970). Bronislaw Malinowski believed that "myth possesses the normative power of fixing custom, of sanctioning modes of behaviour, of giving dignity and importance to an institution" (1961 [1922]:328). This perspective suggests that the myth of origins of the Tutsi, Hutu and Twa castes in Rwanda can be viewed as a sort of moral foundation for the social hierarchy evinced in Rwanda.

The history of Rwanda begins with the reign of Kigwa, who descended from heaven and sired three sons - Gatwa, Gahutu and Gatutsi. To choose his successor, Kigwa decided to entrust each of his sons with a pot of milk to watch over during the night. When dawn came it turned out that Gatwa had drunk the milk; Gahutu had gone to sleep and spilt his milk; only the watchful Gatutsi had stayed up through the night to keep guard over his milk. To Kigwa this was the conclusive evidence that Gatutsi should be his successor and forever free of menial tasks. (Lemarchand 1970:33)

This is an example of the simultaneously integrative and divisive nature of Rwandan culture prior to Belgian colonization. Though each group is separate and plays a relatively different
social role and function, each has a place and is linked by a divine origin in a mythical past. The rich cattle-herding Tutsi, who also survived on agricultural goods provided by Hutu, were at the most exalted position in the hierarchy, followed by the Hutu horticulturalists who raised the cattle belonging to Tutsi, and at the bottom of the social hierarchy, and essentially a social pariah in the perspective of the Tutsi and perhaps also of the Hutu, were the Twa. These caste divisions could be generally distinguished by economic activity, however these groups were also viewed as having phenotypic or "racial" differences. In fact, however, these differences have been now denounced as having been representative more of the imagined than of actual biological differences. These groups were marked with a slight degree of social mobility, as a poor Tutsi could come to be considered as Hutu, a rich Hutu could possibly slip into being a Tutsi, and their descendants as well would come to be distinguished as such (Maybury-Lewis 1997).

Bound to the notion of divinely ordained castes, and second in Lemarchand's themes in Rwandan myth, was that of royal omnipotence wherein the mwami, or king, incarnated the deity Imana (1970). Accordingly, “the mwami, representative of Imana, was the father and protector of all Ruanda. . . . [and he] certainly contributed to the creation in Ruanda individuals of a feeling of belonging to a unit which presented some similarities to a family” (Maquet 1961:151). This belief in the mwami was not limited to Tutsi individuals. A Hutu diviner, in a short autobiography transcribed in the early 1960's, prophetically states that they “shall have a true Mwami and peace will reign and calm will be restored” (Codere 1973:225). Though his prophecy did not come true, the Hutu diviner identified that there was a problem with the current state of affairs, yet more revealingly shows his faith in the institution of the mwami. As will become clear later, through various relationships that are had between men in Rwandan social structure, all are ultimately linked to the king, even the Hutu. Lemarchand's third theme in the “mythical axis” of Rwandan culture, that of kinship, is modelled largely on the hierarchy in the political institution of the king. Here there is also a high level of subordination to a clearly defined lineage head, a living root to which all in the agnatic descent line may be traced.

These three myth themes provide a moral and symbolic framework for the economic and social structure from within which Rwandan individuals could explore possibilities to their advantage, despite clear disadvantages to certain strata of society. The divinely ordained castes, the Tutsi monarchy, the rules of kinship, and also the military and administrative structures, all serve to divide Hutu and Tutsi, from within as well as between the two groups, yet also serve to tie them together as a common culture.

Furthermore, in the buhake system that will be detailed below, the castes are inextricably linked together and to the mwami, and this allows for individual manipulation of possibilities and the perpetuation of Rwandan culture.

Prior to analysis of the clientage, or buhake agreement, it is important for the purposes of an understanding of Rwandan society to point out the archaeological past of the Twa, Hutu and Tutsi, set apart from the mythical origins depicted by Tutsi myth. In fact a quite different story is told, as archaeological evidence suggests that the area that is now Rwanda was first inhabited by Twa-speaking hunters and gatherers, who dominated the area until around A.D.
Hutu speakers then began to settle in the area, setting up farms and a clan-based system of monarchies that dominated the Twa. Around the sixteenth century, new immigrants from the Horn of Africa, the cattle-raising Tutsi, arrived and set up their own monarchy in Rwanda. (Robbins 1999:294)

As there was no great animosity exhibited between the groups until the mid-twentieth century with the rise of the Rwandan intellectuals, and others who perceived the Tutsi as being one side of the same coin as German, then Belgian colonizers. Codere's autobiographies of Hutu men and women do not provide any great evidence of hatred for the Tutsi even at the point at which they transcribed these, which was the early 1960's (1973).

Furthermore, though it is clear that association with Tutsi was no longer viewed as being beneficial for the meeting of economic and social needs, many spoke kindly of the buhake institution they experienced as children through the toil of their fathers. This makes a clear case for the suggestion that conflict in Rwanda is a result of relatively recent events that resulted in the dysfunction of the structure of society in this region.

Buhake, which comes from the verb guhakwa, meaning to “pay one’s respects to a superior in his court” (Maquet 1961:129), denotes the reciprocal relationship between the shebuja, or lord, and the garagu, or client. Both the client and the patron were bound by socially defined rights and obligations, which of course varied according to the situation. The responsibilities of the patron to the client included, but were not limited to, support in lawsuits, food aid in times of poverty, help with bridewealth payments, and care of the garagu’s widow and children should he die (Maquet 1961). The client in return provided personal service to the lord such as accompanying the shebuja when he travelled, building or repairing his home; if the client was Hutu, this would also include working in the fields or standing as an overnight guard (Maquet 1961). Most notably, the patron provided the Hutu client with cattle to which only Tutsi have ownership rights.

While it may be tempting to abuse these rights and obligations, this was generally treated as a respectful and important relationship. If one felt inclined to be a “bad” shebuja one would get “the reputation of being a bad shebuja [and] people who were considering a buhake agreement [would be] led to choose another lord” (Maquet 1961:134), and the reverse situation applied as well for the client. So there were clearly guards against abuses of buhake rights, as the fear of not being able to enter into another buhake agreement was great when this relationship was, at the turn of the century, a crucial relationship for the success of both the client and the patron. The transactional relationship between the garagu and the shebuja was a necessary one, and the “freedom to enter into [a buhake] agreement was socially illusory” (Maquet 1961:134), as the rich could not get by without the labour of the poor, and the wealth and power of the rich could be tapped by these same labourers in return.

This alludes to what Jacques Maquet identified as one of the significant functional attributes of the buhake agreement for the cohesion of Rwandan society and for the survival of the individuals this includes.

To live in a society where several castes very unequal in their social power coexist, frequently puts the individuals in the weaker groups in a very difficult position.

... To be protected against [exacting] demand [made on him by somebody possessing
social power], it is indispensable for the person submitted to it to increase his own social power. It is impossible to do this directly as he cannot, except very rarely, enter into the upper caste, but he may obtain it directly by succeeding in identifying himself with a person endowed with great social power. (Maquet 1961:136-137)

Maquet suggested that the clientage institution is “the only means permitting the protection of socially weak individuals without destroying the unequal participation of the groups in social power” (1961:137). So the first function of the buhake system was that of protecting socially and economically weak, namely the Hutu, by associating them with the dominant caste that would seek to abuse them.

This leads to another social function played by the buhake system, which was the maintenance of caste divisions (Maquet 1961). Where the clientage institution may offer protection to the socially weak, it also ensures the hegemony of Tutsi privileges and maintains the status quo. By retaining ownership of the cattle, the Tutsi may be sure that the Hutu will remain in economically disadvantaged positions. “By granting only a precarious possession of cattle to the clients, [this] left in the hands of the Tutsi the ultimate control of cattle, symbol of social prestige and instrument of power [while] obtaining the advantages of being provided with labour and agricultural produce” (Maquet 1961:141). The Tutsi have adopted what “Oppenheimer calls the bee-keeper’s policy (as opposed to the bear’s policy who for the purpose of robbing the beehive, destroys it), that is to say, to keep the country’s peasants in order permanently to exploit their productive work” (Maquet 1961: 152). Thus the buhake system at once can ensure the reproduction of Rwandan culture by providing the Tutsi with the material wealth that symbolizes their higher status, and assures the precarious position of the Hutu.

Another important function as identified by Maquet was the contribution of the buhake institution to social cohesion in Rwanda. The buhake system served to diversify the subsistence goods to which each caste would have access - the Hutu would contribute agricultural produce and Tutsi would make available to the Hutu the cattle on which they had a monopoly (Maquet 1961). Furthermore, besides the economic dependence fostered by these economic currents, “feudality proved a very effective instrument for the constitution of a culture common to all Ruanda” (Maquet 1961: 138). Also, through the buhake institution, Hutu are in fact adopting some of the culture of the Tutsi by making cattle an important symbol of prestige and power in society. Previously horticulturalists, Hutu are adopting the “cattle complex” as a cultural feature, and thus associating themselves with the Tutsi. This is likewise the case for the Tutsi, who grew to see value in agricultural produce, and began to see their wealth measured by their access to this as did the Hutu. This constant exchange between the castes ensures social cohesion, and is a functional aspect of not only the buhake institution, but also of the feudal structure such as it was in Rwanda prior to colonization.

The buhake institution solves the problem of feudalism, wherein a small elite class must dominate a more populous majority without completely disassociating the inferior group with the means to access social power. However, there is still debate with regards to the integrative
nature of the *buhake* institution. Catharine Newbury criticizes how in studies of Rwanda "ubuhake cattle clientship was often described as performing such an integrative role. . . . [and suggests] that clientship does not necessarily promote social integration; it can - and in Kinyaga[, a part of southern Rwanda,] it did promote social cleavage" (1988:17). She states further that “clientship in Rwanda was not a static social “given”; it was a dynamic phenomenon [and] forms of clientship changed over time” (Newbury 1988:17). However, despite her opposition, her views are entirely analogous with those described above.

The *buhake* institution is a changing social form, and it is a result of the unequal distribution of rights within the relationships between Tutsi pastoralists and Hutu horticulturalists. Previously reciprocal relationships which had served to integrate these two groups in Rwanda, as a result of the fact that “the direction of change in clientship forms in Rwanda tended to be unidirectional, toward less reciprocity and more exploitation” (Newbury 1988:17), became divisive as a result of outside manipulation of cultural forms. Many recent studies have also suggested that at the beginning of the twentieth century, not all Hutu and Tutsi were engaged in clientship agreements (Claessen 1981:1981), and consequently the importance of the *buhake* institution is questionable. There is no conclusive empirical data to this effect as any studies in this area were limited in their geographical scope, and though these are the major criticisms that could be pointed out of the ideas presented as yet, none dispel the idea that the *buhake* system was a solution to the problem of stratified society.

The events that instigated the dysfunction between Tutsi and Hutu groups in Rwanda is a good example of the far-reaching effects of colonization on many regions of the world even today. "When the Germans assumed control of the area after the Berlin conference of 1884, they applied their racist ideology and assumed that the generally taller, lighter-skinned Tutsis were more “natural” rulers, while the Hutus were destined to serve them" (Robbins 1999:294). This increased the power of the Tutsi minority to some degree, and the division became one of ethnicity. However, it was following the defeat of Germany in World War I that Belgian rulers exhibited the colonial tendency to reorder existing social forms. This resulted in the unequal distribution of power along lines that had never before been experienced in Rwanda, and the Tutsi grew in power as the time passed as they associated and became tied primarily to Belgian colonizers.

The Belgians replaced all Hutu chiefs with Tutsis and issued identity cards that noted ethnic identity, making the division between Hutu and Tutsi far more rigid than it had been before colonial control. They also gave the Tutsi elite the responsibility to collect taxes and administer the justice system. The Tutsi chiefs used this new power granted them by Belgian rule to gain Hutu land (Robbins 1999:294).

This essentially “reduced the likelihood that the Hutu would think of the Tutsi as protectors”, moreover, the incumbents were given a greatly reinforced confidence in themselves, both as chiefs and as representatives of a ruling caste” (Lemarchand 1970:120). With this was the fact that the Tutsi elite no longer answered to the *mwami*, but to the Belgian colonialists and their first obligation was to the administration (Lemarchand 1970).

The Tutsi monopoly on social and political power intensified the strain on Hutu and Tutsi relations, and the Tutsi
were soon perceived to be responsible for the ills of the Hutu.

Forced labor was common, taxes were increased, and the beating of peasants by Belgian colonialists became standard practice. Furthermore, the colonial rulers transformed the economy, requiring peasants to shift their activities from subsistence or food crops to export crops, such as coffee (Robbins 1999:294).

So, as the *buhake* relationships no longer exist between Tutsi and Hutu, and cultural exchange is no longer possible as a result of the Tutsi association with the colonialists, there occurs a dysfunction between these two societies. When these types of relationships lost all meaning, the linkages between the Hutu and Tutsi also ceased to exist. In 1954 the *Mwami* is quoted: “The profound transformations that have occurred in all walks of life have necessarily had some perceptible repercussions on the *buhake*, and in many respects this institution has lost its imperative and regulatory character” (Lemarchand 1970:128). At this time a strict regulatory framework was set up, and new *buhake* cattle-contracts were prohibited. So in this instance, the abolition may be viewed as a cause and a symptom of the dysfunction of Rwandan culture. This trend would thus continue until the late 1950’s with “the rise of a politically-conscious Hutu intelleegentsia” for the “launching and organisation of a Hutu revolutionary force” that “presupposed, specifically, the sundering of vassalage ties at some points in the social hierarchy, and an earnest desire on the part of at least some Hutu peasants to liquidate whatever links of dependency still operated in the chain of vassalage” (Lemarchand 1970:126).

The *buhake* institution in Rwanda was both an expression of the relationship between Tutsi and Hutu, and a means of maintaining that relationship as well, so following Belgian colonization not only would the disappearance of this institution in Rwandan culture be a source of tension, but it could also be perceived as a symptom of that tension as well. The cattle-contract in Rwandan culture was a means for the marginalised to gain access to social power, and it also ensured that the wealthy retain that social power. So the removal of this institution and the subsequent conflict suggests the functional nature of social structures, and of how a dysfunction may occur when these are distorted. This is an extremely interesting case of how colonial forms interfered with existing cultural structures, and provides a case for the functional nature of these cultural structures.

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