

6-2018

**Book Review: *Negotiating Genocide in Rwanda: The Politics of History***

Dorina Bekoe  
*Africa Center for Strategic Studies*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/gsp>

---

**Recommended Citation**

Bekoe, Dorina (2018) "Book Review: *Negotiating Genocide in Rwanda: The Politics of History*," *Genocide Studies and Prevention: An International Journal*: Vol. 12: Iss. 1: 98-100.

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.5038/1911-9933.12.1.1580>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/gsp/vol12/iss1/9>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Open Access Journals at Digital Commons @ University of South Florida. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Genocide Studies and Prevention: An International Journal* by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ University of South Florida. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@usf.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@usf.edu).

## **Book Review: *Negotiating Genocide in Rwanda: The Politics of History***

**Dorina A. Bekoe**

*Africa Center for Strategic Studies*  
Washington, D.C., USA

*Negotiating Genocide in Rwanda: The Politics of History*

Erin Jessee

New York City, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017

302 Pages; Price: \$109.00 Hardcover

Reviewed by Dorina A. Bekoe

Africa Center for Strategic Studies

On August 4, 2017, Rwandans re-elected President Paul Kagame to a third term with nearly 99% of the vote. This incredible result, signifying *de facto* consensus, is all the more outstanding when considered through the lens of Erin Jessee's book, *Negotiating Genocide in Rwanda: The Politics of History*. Jessee sets out to discover how distinct communities in Rwanda currently interpret its past, present, and future; she finds a nation at odds with itself and the official narrative.

Jessee, an oral historian at the University of Glasgow, uses the methodology of oral history to juxtapose the Rwandan government's official narrative of the 1994 genocide with Rwandans' lived and living experiences. She challenges the Rwandan government's official version of history that emphasizes Rwanda's idyllic past; the genocide of the Tutsis (exclusive of moderate Hutus); and a future unmarred by the ethnic divisions that brought on the genocide. The book presents difficult challenges, to say the least: Jessee asks people—survivors, victims, perpetrators, and bystanders—to reflect and relive unimaginable suffering. Convincing people to speak their truth to a stranger is difficult in any circumstance. However, persuading people to divulge personal details of a situation overshadowed by the trauma of genocide, while working in an environment where the government is determined to sanction only one version of history, can render the project especially daunting.

Jessee accomplishes this difficult task through a series of 57 interviews with a broad set of stakeholders: genocide survivors; genocidaires; civil service employees in Rwanda's state memorial museums; and returnees—whom Jessee describes as mainly Tutsi elite who fled political and ethnic violence during the Hutu government's reign from 1959-1962, returning more than 30 years later when the Tutsi-led Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) took power following the 1994 genocide. Notably, beyond the obvious division between Hutus and Tutsis among the interviewees, Jessee also includes Twa, a minority group; Hutus that also consider themselves genocide survivors, in contradiction of the state's recognition; and women, who demonstrate a gender dimension in how truth reveals itself. With its varied interviewees, the book embodies the principles of its concluding chapter, "The Danger of a Single Story," a title inspired by Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's 2009 TED talk, which warned that knowing only one side of the story robs people of understanding their common bonds and a fuller perspective of each other's experiences.<sup>1</sup>

*Negotiating Genocide in Rwanda* is unique among many books on Rwanda's 1994 genocide. It does not directly interrogate the causes of genocide, the international community's response, or Rwanda's post-genocide nation-building. While the book does not point fingers or assign blame—which does not suggest that it excuses the horrific violence of the genocide—it tries to bring understanding and perspective. This is trickiest in the chapter of interviews with Hutu genocidaires. One senses that Jessee attempts a delicate balance. She does not consciously go overboard to reassure the reader of her horror of the crime committed by the convicted genocidaires. She remains clear in her purpose not so much to explain the crime, as it is to understand the frame-of-mind, societal milieu, and historical context in which the crime unfolded. In other words, she tries to provide insight to how and why a seemingly normally functioning member of society can

---

<sup>1</sup> Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, "The danger of a single story," TED Talks, October 7, 2009. <https://youtu.be/D9Ihs24Izeg>

justify to themselves the commission of these crimes. Students of genocide and mass atrocities continue to struggle with answering such questions satisfactorily.

The interviews reveal striking differences between Rwandans' lived experiences from the official narrative. In the official narrative, which Jessee narrates through her visits to all of the country's 6 genocide memorials, the onset of colonialism disrupted Rwanda's idyllic past, where Hutus and Tutsis lived in harmony. Colonialists cemented ethnic divisions between Tutsis and Hutus by the issuance of identity cards, enabling the two groups to grow distant. The government's narrative depicts the post-colonial days and the transition to democracy as anti-Tutsi; the 1994 downing of President Juvénal Habyarimana's plane serves as the trigger for the Tutsi genocide.

The interviews reveal a country divided over this official narrative. Tutsis largely agreed with the narrative, while accused genocidaires viewed events nearly oppositely. However, many agreed that the prevailing RPF narrative had resulted in further driving apart the two communities. The interviews acknowledge ethnic cleavages that the government tries hard to suppress. While societies can have competing narratives about a common history, the stories told by these 57 Rwandans goes beyond simply telling a different version of their perceived and lived histories. The stories that unfold in Jessee's book expose the intransigence of the state to consider different lived and living experiences.

The salience of ethnicity among Rwandans represents another striking aspect of the stories told by Jessee's interviewees. Under President Kagame, Rwanda has tried to quash conceptions and identification with ethnicity. At first blush, one can understand—even commend—such an effort: the 1994 genocide targeted Rwanda's Tutsi, Kagame's ethnic group, killing nearly 800,000 people within 100 days. An effort to evolve society to think beyond ethnicity, where all citizens identify only as Rwandan, removes the single most important factor of the genocide. But, ethnicity and ethnic stereotypes have not disappeared in Rwanda; they emerge with seemingly little prompting by Jessee.

Indeed, the gap between reality and the state's sanctioned version of events brings up many questions for those concerned about peacebuilding, memorialization, reconciliation, and justice. Can a society survive without the real truth emerging? How does a narrative relevant to a small slice of the population foster reconciliation? Can disregarding ethnicity eventually eliminate it as a divisive force?

While central to Jessee's project, the interviews are not the only important component of Jessee's work. The book is engaging because Jessee carries the reader with her; Jessee's methodology serves as much a part of the story as the interviews themselves. She provides a rich background of her experiences in interacting with Rwandan government officials, as well as her challenges and triumphs in the field—providing an important backdrop and context to the interviews.

Jessee exhibits a heightened sense of self-awareness of her role and others' perception of her; Jessee's first interview is especially instructive. She describes her increasing friendship and closeness with an employee at a state memorial museum, which eventually leads to an agreement for an interview. The interview is a failure, when compared to the others that follow, as the young lady is tense and reluctant to speak her truth. It is a commentary on Jessee's research methodology—from which she learns key lessons. But it is also a commentary on the reluctance of many Rwandans to speak openly and to trust. It is a turning point in Jessee's research and outreach methodology, exposing the level of distrust and reticence still present among Rwandans and the genocide narrative. Many other challenges present themselves along the way; Jessee addresses them honestly and uses them as learning experiences. She convinces Rwandans to tell poignant and believable stories. With stories too painful for even the survivors to talk about, Jessee finds ways to bring the reader into the interviewees' reality by discussing different angles of the stories.

Jessee's concluding chapter weaves the different perspectives and interviews together in a bid to compare and contrast them. Here, her systematic approach with all groups allows her to relate how different groups see Rwanda's past, present, and future. She demonstrates the congruence between the returnees' views with the prevailing government perspective and the odds at which Hutus and Tutsis continue to find themselves. Jessee's book shows that more than two decades after the genocide, ethnicity remains as salient as ever. It shows that different perspectives of history exist, despite official efforts to quash them.

While Jessee's singular focus on Rwanda is illuminating, it also generates a number of other questions about how regional and international bodies address impending or growing atrocities or genocides in Africa. The interviews raise questions around conflict resolution in Africa, generally, and preventing genocide and mass atrocities, in particular.

Jessee's interviews bring to the fore difficult questions about how states and international actors manage to heal deeply divided ethnic groups. A considerable number of scholars and practitioners emphasize recognizing and redressing ethnic grievances. This may manifest in political power-sharing or other overt signs of ethnic inclusion. However, Rwanda has chosen to force a silence around ethnicity. Does burying ethnicity suppress or inflame ethnic division? If elite society refrains from emphasizing ethnic division, does that practice trickle down eventually? Or, are there limits to how much government can legislate? How common is Rwanda's approach to preventing and redressing genocide, in practice? How has Burundi, which did not choose to bury ethnicity, fared in terms of reconciliation?

Jessee's book questions how we read signs of impending conflict and take steps to prevent violence. While the book is not meant to explain why genocide happens, it still prompts the question: How do people, who seem to be well-adjusted, commit such horrendous crimes? How did leaders of the genocide solve the collective action problem, to incite Hutus to murder fellow citizens? A subtext of many interviews hints at the fear that genocide could recur. Given the government's official narrative that denies other voices, does it create the same conditions that led to the 1994 genocide? How are conditions today different than in 1994?

Admittedly, the book cannot necessarily answer these questions directly. Nonetheless, they linger because of the gravity of the violence. The interviews serve as an important lens when interrogating the work in international relations and comparative politics, which address questions of conflict resolution and prevention in Rwanda—and Africa, generally. Reflecting back on the seemingly consensual support for Kagame, scholars and analysts must contend with the possibility that Rwandans could be making a choice—for the time being—to accept the differences that remain in the national narrative, rather than probe the divisiveness of their lived and living experiences. For conflict resolution, it suggests that we should expect a much longer arc toward durable peace.