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Arts & Literature: Looking Back at the Roots of Genocides in Ex-Belgian Africa

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Introduction

As one who spent much of his professional life trying to elucidate the contrasting trajectories of Rwanda and Burundi—two small Central African republics that have more in common than any two other states in the continent—I never cease to be puzzled by the paradox of the proverbial “false twins.” Both were once archaic kingdoms ruled by pastoralist oligarchies; both were stratified societies held together by an underlying “premise of inequality,” where Tutsi minorities enjoyed a monopoly of power over the majority of the Hutu masses, and their languages, though distinct, were (and are) mutually intelligible. Most dramatically, they both experienced ethnic violence on a genocidal scale, with representatives of the victimized group now solidly entrenched as the ruling elites. Rwanda, despite having abolished all references to ethnic identities, is for all intents and purposes, a Tutsi-dominated autocracy, while in Burundi, the opposite is true, with Hutu elements holding unfettered control over the institutions of the state.

Burundi as an Outlier

As a point of entry into this discussion, it may be useful to reflect on the images that stick in my mind when I recall the days I first came in contact with what was still officially known as the Trust Territory of Ruanda-Urundi. The year was 1960, two years before their independence as Rwanda and Burundi. I was, at the time, a graduate student at UCLA, working on a doctoral dissertation on the Congo, and while traveling through the Kivu province, I was fortunate enough to be the guest of the *Institut pour la Recherche en Afrique Centrale* (IRSAC) near Bukavu. This was where I ran into a couple of Belgian colleagues who kindly offered me to join them on a brief trip to Rwanda. The offer was hard to resist. As it turned out, it was from this impromptu foray into the early phase of the Hutu revolution, when we became witness to scenes of extreme violence, that I first became aware of the chasm separating the two states just as they were about to cross the threshold of independence.

As we drove south from Kigali on our way back to Bujumbura, we suddenly ran smack into a group of Hutu insurgents trying to set aflame Tutsi huts (*rugos*). I still remember two Tutsi children lying dead near their hut, reduced to ashes, the long lines of Hutu assailants crouching alongside the road under the casual watch of Belgian paratroopers, the smoke rising above the hills.

The contrast with Burundi couldn't have been greater. While Rwanda was in the throes of a brutal uprising, with the Hutu and Tutsi engaged in a violent struggle for supremacy, Burundi was relatively peaceful. Signs of Hutu-Tutsi enmities were nowhere to be seen. Although the country was by no means free of conflict, its epicenter revolved around dynastic tensions between descendants of pretenders-to-the-throne, collectively referred to as *ganwa*. One group, the Bezi, was identified with the recently created nationalist *Union pour le Progrès National* (Uprona); the other, the Batware, with the pro-Belgian *Parti Démocrate Chrétien* (PDC).

What is one to make of such strikingly divergent pathways to independence?

This is the question that I would ponder off and on over the following years as I turned my attention away from the Congo to its minuscule neighbors. The answer, in part, came in the form of a heavy tome published in 1970 under the uninspiring title of *Rwanda and Burundi*.¹ In the ten years that elapsed between my first trip to the region and the publication of my book, a sea of change had taken place in the political configurations of each state. By 1970, Rwanda was a Hutu-dominated republic, with a substantial segment of its Tutsi population forced into exile. Burundi, which I had known as an oasis of relative calm, was in the grip of a growing Hutu-Tutsi conflict that would split the Uprona party into rival factions, bring the monarchy to the edge of collapse, and pave the way for a Tutsi-led military coup. All this made it imperative to rethink the theoretical model initially envisaged to make sense of the two states' diametrically opposed trajectories.

The Decoupling of the False Twins

In retrospect, my perception of Burundi as a model of stability compared to Rwanda was not so much erroneous as it was all too reified, fixed in time and space, indifferent to its wider regional context. Much of my understanding of their divergent responses to their approaching independence was unduly influenced by what I had been witness to in August 1960.

Sameness does not mean carbon copy similarity. For all their shared characteristics, Burundi society emerges as a distinctly more complex entity, significantly less vulnerable to ethnic tension than Rwanda. What at first was little more than a hunch, on closer scrutiny would soon crystallize as undeniable evidence. For one thing, the presence of rival *ganwa* elites at the top of the social pyramid stood as a major complicating factor. So is also the division of the Tutsi population in two culturally and politically distinct aggregates, the Tutsi Hima, concentrated in the south and central regions, traditionally looked upon as supposedly low caste, and the Tutsi Banyaruguru, whose geographical and social proximity to the crown implied higher status. Finally, the ethos of the monarchy had little in common with its counterpart in Rwanda, where the king (*mwami*) was both the symbol and the instrument of Tutsi domination. There was nothing in Burundi comparable to the dynastic poems, historical traditions, secret codes of succession, and mythical representations surrounding the royal drum, said to contain the genital remains of Hutu kinglets killed in battle.

The contrast between the two kingships is perhaps best illustrated by a photograph dating back to the 1920s: Mwambutsa, the king of Burundi wearing an open shirt in an ill-fitting cotton suit and a bush hat, and Musinga of Rwanda, ramrod straight, resplendent in his colorful regal attire. The asymmetry was hardly diminished by Musinga's successor, the seven-foot sphinx-like Mutara Rudahigwa, his face sometimes hidden by a row of beads hanging from his headdress.

I tried to pin down the significance of such differences in a paper presented in 1966 at a professional meeting, in which I underscored Burundi's capacity to meet the challenge of modernization with relative success, in stark contrast with Rwanda. This theme was later picked up by Samuel Huntington, who tersely summed up the gist of his argument: "The inability of Tutsi and Hutu to live together in peace in Rwanda's centralized system was definitely established. Their ability to coexist in Burundi's decentralized system remained unproven but still possible."²

By 1972, his cautiously upbeat (and somewhat misleading) assessment of Burundi's capacity to manage a peaceful coexistence of its ethnic communities had been proven tragically wrong. In

¹ René Lemarchand, *Rwanda and Burundi* (London: The Pall Mall Press), 1970.

² Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), 173.

what turned out to be the first genocide ever experienced in independent Africa, anywhere from 200,000 to 300,000 Hutu were massacred in cold blood by a Tutsi-dominated army acting in response to a localized Hutu-led insurrection.³

By what combination of circumstances could Burundi, a decade after independence, end up as a Tutsi-dominated ethnocracy, a mirror image of its neighbor to the north?

Rwanda's Hutu Revolution: A Colonially Manipulated Game Changer

To this question, the most obvious answer is to point to the intense fears instilled in the minds of the Tutsi minority of Burundi by the spinoffs of the Hutu revolution in Rwanda. This is the argument I have made on a number of occasions and in several publications. Nonetheless, a great deal more could have been said of the causes and consequences of this pivotal event. A more convincing interpretation would have paid greater attention to the role played by the departing colonizer in preparing the ground for a Hutu-led seizure of power in Rwanda. What I had seen during my trip to Rwanda in the summer of 1960 was only the tip of the iceberg. Only years later did I take the full measure of the underhanded maneuverings and manipulations orchestrated by Belgium's *Résident Militaire*, Col. Guy Logiest. In his preface to Logiest's *apologia pro vita sua*, Professor Stengers draws an intriguing comparison with the role of King Leopold in the Congo: "If we are to understand why there has been a Congo we need to understand Leopold's psychology; in order to understand why there is a Hutu-dominated Rwanda you have to understand Colonel Logiest."⁴ However overdrawn, the parallel brings into focus the crucial role played by the Belgian proconsul in handing the levers of power to the nascent Hutu elites.

His critical first step in November 1959 was to dismiss all Tutsi chiefs and sub-chiefs and replace them with appointed burgomasters (the equivalent of mayors). In anticipation of Tutsi unrest, units of the Congo-based *Force Publique* were called to join the Belgian paratroopers already on the ground. The Hutu revolution, still in the initial phase of peasant jacquerie, broke out on November 1, 1959, a day remembered as All Saints Day, and later referred to as the Hutu uprising, *La Toussaint Rwandaise*.⁵ This is how a UN report described the scenes of arson ignited by Hutu extremists: "The incendiaries set off in bands of ten. Armed with machetes and paraffin... they pillaged Tutsi houses as they passed on their way and set fire to them... Day after day fires spread from hill to hill."⁶ Apparently, little was done to stop the arsonists. What followed can best be described as a case of systematic ethnic cleansing resulting in the forced exodus of thousands of Tutsi families with no other option than to seek asylum in neighboring territories.

The final blow delivered against the Tutsi monarchy came in January 1961 with the so-called coup d'Etat of Gitarama. Organized in great secrecy in the city of the same name by a group of Hutu leaders acting in connivance with the military resident, it took the form of an improvised gathering of some three thousand burgomasters and municipal councilors, officially rumored to have come together to discuss security issues. The reality turned out to be vastly different. Once assembled, the participants sitting as a constituent assembly proclaimed high and loud the abolition of the monarchy and all its symbols, including the royal drum, and the birth of the democratic and sovereign republic of Rwanda. After nominating a provisional prime minister, Grégoire Kayibanda, later to become the first president of the first republic, the 3,126

³ For a more detailed discussion, see chapter 5, "The 1972 Watershed" in René Lemarchand, *Burundi: Ethnic Conflict and Genocide* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994) 76–105.

⁴ Guy Logiest, *Mission au Rwanda: Un Blanc dans la Bagarre Tutsi-Hutu* (Brussels: Didier Hattier, 1988), iv.

⁵ See Jean-Robert Hubert, *La Toussaint Rwandaise: et sa Répression* (Brussels: Académie Royale des Sciences d'Outre Mer, 1965).

⁶ Lemarchand, *Rwanda and Burundi*, 180.

burgomasters and councilors co-opted among themselves the members of a legislative assembly and a ten-member cabinet. Thus ended the centuries-old monarchy—not with a bang but with a secretly planned regime change that left many wondering how it all happened. One such skeptic was none other than the Belgian Vice-Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs, Paul-Henri Spaak. After inviting Logiest to his home after his mandate as military resident, the latter was asked point blank: “Colonel, how did you manage to organize a revolution in Rwanda? I’ve always been curious to know how some revolutions succeed and others fail.” Predictably, Logiest gave full credit to the weight of the oppressed Hutu population.⁷ Without trying to underplay the growing popular pressures for a change of regime, one wonders whether they could have given rise to a full-fledged republican regime *prior to independence* without the decisive push offered by the military resident.

What Logiest was unable to achieve was a transformation of grassroots attitudes among the Hutu, including their inability to take effective control of their political destinies.

On a trip back to Rwanda in 1967, I was struck by the sense of incompetence on display among local officials. One of them, after being asked to let me have access to the communal archives, handed me the keys to the room where they were housed, with no other instructions but to hand them back when I was done. The debates going on in the legislative assembly were often conducted in Kinyarwanda, but this was hardly enough to conceal the internal discords among legislators or, for that matter, among the members of the government. Few Tutsi were seen in the streets of Kigali, and those bold enough to be seen kept a low profile. What I remember most vividly was the atmosphere of sullen resignation hovering over the country, a kind of global psychological letdown, as if the revolution had left the country with deep wounds. Not only was the complementary “other” missing, but he was now actively engaged in retaliatory raids to bring down the fragile republic.⁸ If it hadn’t been for the timely intervention of Belgian military advisers, the December 1963 raid on Kigali, organized by Tutsi refugees from Rwanda operating from Burundi, would have probably sealed the fate of the Kayibanda government.

With the benefit of hindsight, I also wonder whether Burundi’s plunge into the abyss in 1972 could have happened in the absence of the huge outflow of Tutsi refugees from Rwanda into Burundi, for which Logiest also deserves considerable credit.

Refugee Flows as Vectors of Conflict

In a context as thoroughly politicized as the Great Lakes, refugees are never neutral. Fearful one day, fearsome the next, they stand as a force to be reckoned with. “Brutality,” Michela Wrong observed, “passes like a virus from one community to another.”⁹ Where ethnic identities cut across geographical boundaries, all that’s needed for a virus to spread is a carrier. This is where refugee flows help us understand how killings in one state can pave the way for genocide in another.

Consider the case of Burundi, where on the eve of independence, the country offered asylum to some 40,000 Tutsi refugees from Rwanda.¹⁰ From all the evidence, the presence in the country of such a staggering number of Tutsi, many of whom stood as witness to the horrors they and their

⁷ Logiest, *Mission au Rwanda*, 7.

⁸ For a map of the targets and dates of the Tutsi-led raids conducted between 1963 and 1964, see Lemarchand, *Rwanda and Burundi*, 218.

⁹ Michela Wrong, *Do Not Disturb: The Story of a Political Murder and an African Regime Gone Bad* (London: Fourth Estate, 2022), 270.

¹⁰ This figure is from a UN document cited by Aidan Russell in his book. See Aidan Russell, *Politics and Violence in Burundi: The Language of Truth in an Emerging State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 137.

kinsmen had endured at the hands of Hutu revolutionaries in their homeland, served as a powerful stimulus to the rise of ethnic hatreds in their country of asylum.

I remember the 1972 bloodbath as one of the most painful moments of my early years as an Africanist. I was forty at the time and had just returned from weeks of fieldwork in and around Bujumbura, in the hope of producing the definitive comparative history of Rwanda and Burundi. What few bits of information which had filtered through the media left me in a state of shock. I had lost a number of Hutu friends who, days earlier, had spent time with me trying to educate me on the history of their country. As the horrific scale of the carnage finally came into view, I found myself utterly unable to make rational sense of what had happened. It took me awhile to put these events in the perspective of a self-fulfilling prophecy: the warnings issued by Tutsi refugees did not fall on deaf ears; as fears of a Hutu republic became more prevalent, their originally false imputations became part of the real world.

As I reflect on this long-ago tragedy, I am still at a loss to figure out why it attracted so little attention from the scholarly community. Equally puzzling is why the consensus of opinion that eventually emerged among some well-informed observers appeared so overwhelmingly reflective of the government White Paper that put the onus of responsibility on the Hutu.¹¹

I take no little pride in having written one of first accounts of the 1972 killings in a report to the London-based Minority Rights Group (MRG).¹² Though by no means beyond criticisms, it was quite favorably reviewed by Bernard Levin in the *London Times* (under the title “The Blood on the Flag of Burundi”) and received positive comments from Jan Vansina and other colleagues in the US. Only in France did it fail to meet with the approval of what few Africanists had worked on the Great Lakes, with Jean-Pierre Chretien—who had declined my invitation to do a joint report for the MRG—asserting himself as my most acerbic critic; he later admitted, so egregious were the errors contained in the report, that he had no other choice but to turn down his thumbs. A more candid response would have underscored the risks of being declared persona non grata at a time when conducting field work in Burundi was his first priority. At any rate, the mixed reviews received by my MRG report made clear to me the risks involved in taking up positions deemed too controversial.

Blaming the Victims

Seen through the prism of the government White Paper, issued immediately after the restoration of “peace and order,” the post-genocidal landscape that comes into view is surreal. In a stunning exercise in role reversal, the Hutu are cast as the génocidaires, and the army-led repression as the God-sent intervention that happened in the nick of time to prevent the worst from happening. An exceptional threat required an exceptional response: “The sheer number of victims, 50,000 (sic), the scale of the means deployed, the plans, maps and documents seized, convincingly demonstrate that the aggressors did not simply aim at the overthrow of republican institutions but systematically planned the elimination of an entire ethnic group, the Tutsi... This is why the Burundi authorities felt obligated to inflict a severe punishment on those responsible for this genocide.”¹³

¹¹ See the summary of the White Paper in *Le Monde*. See “Un livre blanc affirme la responsabilité des Hutu dans les récents massacres,” *Le Monde*, June 9, 1972, accessed September 28, 2022, https://www.lemonde.fr/archives/article/1972/06/09/un-livre-blanc-reaffirme-la-responsabilite-des-hutus-dans-les-recents-massacres_2392629_1819218.html; see also International Court of Justice (ICJ), *Case Concerning Armed Activities on the Territory of the Congo (Democratic Republic of the Congo v. Uganda): White Paper (Vols. I and II)*, court reproduction, June 23, 1999, accessed September 28, 2022, <https://www.icj-cij.org/public/files/case-related/116/13458.pdf>.

¹² René Lemarchand and David Martin, *Report No. 20: Selective Genocide in Burundi* (London: Minority Rights Group, [1974] 2016), accessed September 28, 2022, <https://minorityrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Selective-Genocide-in-Burundi-english.pdf>.

¹³ See René Lemarchand ed. *Forgotten Genocides: Oblivion, Denial and Memory* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 47.

Coming from the Tutsi-dominated government of President Micombero, this travesty of reality is not surprising. What makes it unusual is how far this fantasy has been endorsed in one form or another, not just by historians but a number of high-profile international personalities who should have known better. Remarkable by its fawning sycophancy was the statement issued by the notoriously compromised UN Secretary Kurt Waldheim, expressing his “fervent hope that peace, harmony and stability can be brought about speedily and successfully and that Burundi will thereby achieve the goals of social progress, better standards of life and other ideals and principles set forth in the UN Charter.”¹⁴ Even more astonishing was the comment of the Secretary General of the Organization of African Unity (now African Union), Diallo Telli: “My presence here in Bujumbura signifies the total solidarity of the OAU Secretariat with the President of Burundi and with the government of the fraternal people of Burundi.”¹⁵

No matter how outrageous, such statements evoked little or no reaction from the international community.

Not until the publication in 2007 of *Burundi 1972 au Bord des Genocides*, co-authored by Jean-Pierre Chrétien and Jean-Francois Dupaquier, was a serious effort made to break the conspiracy of silence surrounding the 1972 bloodbath. Astonishing as it may sound, however, out of the mass of documentation assembled by the authors, came the conclusion that the mass murder of hundreds of thousands of Hutu civilians stemmed from their well-corroborated genocidal intentions against the Tutsi. There is no need here to reiterate the criticisms I made elsewhere about the authors’ clunky methodology, the slender evidence on which they base their conclusions, and their uncritical interpretation of the statements made by former officials, such as Emile Mworoha, who once served as of the president of the *Jeunesses Révolutionnaires Rwagasore* (JRR), the sinister organization in charge of rounding up Hutu victims and delivering them to their graves.¹⁶ Suffice it to note that for all its flaws, their argument is not a unique or aberrant case. It echoes the views advanced by a number of Burund intelligentsia, including Evariste Ngayimpenda, whose outrageously revisionist thesis, *Histoire du conflit politico-ethnique Burundais* (2004) sets forth the view that the killings of Tutsi by Hutu qualify as genocide, while the mass extermination of Hutu can only be described as a legitimate repression.

The persistence of the “blaming the victims” argument was brought to my attention more recently in the context of an international conference on Burundi organized in April in Ottawa by my colleague Pacifique Manirakiza. Undaunted, Evariste Ngayimpenda reiterated his familiar thesis, only to be followed by another “blame the victim” ideologue, by Emmanuel Nkurunziza. Honored though I was to have been invited as the keynote speaker, I must admit feeling somewhat uneasy having to listen to a concerted defense of mass killings in the name of a genocidal intent unsupported by any shred of evidence.

Tortuous Pathways to a Similar Destination

In November 1993, reflecting on Burundi’s blood-stained trajectory, I wrote: “Nowhere else in Africa has so much violence killed so many people in so small a place as in Burundi during the years following independence.”¹⁷ That statement proved sadly premature. Five months later, Rwanda suffered an even more terrifying genocide with an estimated half a million Tutsi victims. No other event has played a more decisive role in propelling the two states along divergent pathways, later to converge as ethnic dictatorships.

¹⁴ Lemarchand, *Burundi: Ethnic Conflict and Genocide*.

¹⁵ Lemarchand, *Forgotten Genocides*, 43.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 37–50.

¹⁷ Lemarchand, *Burundi: Ethnic Conflict and Genocide*, preface.

All genocides are alike in the horror they evoke, but on closer inspection, they each stand out as unlike any other. The identity of the victims is not the only trait that distinguishes the mass murder of Tutsi in Rwanda. In retrospect, the really critical difference with Burundi lies in the huge outpouring of popular sympathy for President Kagame for having brought the killings to an end, and, as a gesture of self-redemption for its failure to intervene, the international community's generous financial assistance to his government. Over the years, tens of millions of dollars found their way into the coffers of the Rwandan state. Never mind that some nagging questions remain about Kagame's responsibility in the crash of President Habyarimana's plane (the triggering factor that set off the killings), about his direct involvement in the invasion of the Congo in 1996, and the subsequent "cleaning up" of Hutu refugee camps, later described by the UN as a conceivable act of genocide. None of this went unnoticed by outside observers. Nonetheless, the support of the international community for Kagame remained undiminished. His regime's reputation of incorruptibility and outstanding performance in terms of economic and social development trumped all other reference points, including, of course, his utter disdain of the most elementary democratic rights and unswerving commitment to eradicating all references to ethnic identities. Especially revealing of his warped personality are the devastating exposes by two talented prize-winning female journalists, whose strictures leave little doubt about his personal involvement in the killing of his political enemies, not to mention his responsibility in the cold-blooded murder of thousands of Hutu civilians.¹⁸

Burundi's trajectory is more complicated. But if we take 2005 as a reference point, when the new constitution was adopted, based on a power-sharing formula, the contrast with Rwanda is blindingly clear: rather than eliminating ethnicities at the stroke of the pen, the constitutional recognition of their existence served as the building block of a multi-ethnic democracy. The result made Burundi one of the rare examples in the continent of a functioning pluralist democracy; although the experiment proved short-lived. In defiance of the constitutionally sanctioned two-term limits of his presidency, Nkurunziza (who died in office a few years later) insisted on staying in office, only to trigger an abortive Hutu-led coup in 2015. Repression ensued. Three years later, after proclaiming himself the "eternal supreme guide" of his people, the constitutional provisions that once guaranteed a meaningful sharing of power between Hutu and Tutsi were dismantled bit by bit, giving the former almost unlimited control over the government. But the most effective source of Hutu power stemmed from the growing hegemony of the ruling *Conseil National de la Défense de la Démocratie-Front pour la Défense de la Démocratie* (CNDDFD). Buttressed by the rise of parallel organizations, including the all-powerful intelligence agency (*Service national de renseignements*) and *jeunesse* groups, such as the so-called *imbonerakure* ("those who see from afar"), of sinister reputation, high-ranking army bigwigs are in charge of running key ministries. Under Nkurunziza's successor, Evariste Ndayishimiye, the evangelist streak that once loomed so large across the government has largely disappeared. What remains unchanged is the relentless trend towards a Hutu-led dictatorship and growing marginalization and persecution of the Tutsi minority.

Both states are ethnic dictatorships, yet nuances are in order. There is nothing comparable in Burundi to the extreme centralization of power embodied in Rwanda's Directorate of Military Intelligence (DMI), perhaps the most sophisticated killing machine anywhere on the continent. The record of abominations, credited to the DMI, suggests a mix of the USSR Politburo and Cosa Nostra, with Kagame acting as the orchestrator. Power in Burundi is no less repressive for being more diffuse, fragmented as it is among different organizations swirling around the ruling party apparatus. Who really holds power at any given time is anybody's guess. What emerges, then, is a curious reenactment in the guise of modern dictatorships of the traditional

¹⁸ Wrong, Do Not Disturb; Judy Rever, *In Praise of Blood: The Crimes of the Rwandan Patriotic Front* (New York: Random House Canada, 2018).

pattern that distinguished one kingdom from the other—a highly centralized, all-powerful monarchy at loggerheads with a deeply fragmented false twin.

In suggesting a new way of thinking about the significance of tradition, I am not dismissing the role of political actors. Agency is sometimes inseparable from political institution. Just consider the ceaseless recourse to violence associated with the reign of *mwami* Rwabugiri in the late nineteenth century—ably discussed by Jan Vansina as “the nightmare of violence as a political tool”¹⁹—so strikingly reminiscent of Kagame’s reliance on brute force, including murder, to stay in power. What comes into focus in Rwanda is the joining together of strong rulers and a centralizing and expanding power structure. In Burundi, the dominant pattern is precisely the opposite—that of weak rulers hemmed in by local satraps. The contrast between Rwabugiri and Mezi Gisabo, whose reigns coincided, is familiar to historians of the region, and so, also, the different power structures associated with each monarch. Personal pathologies are not necessarily the stuff of comparative historical analysis, but in some cases, their resonance is difficult to ignore.

¹⁹ Jan Vansina, *Le Rwanda ancien. Le royaume Nyiginya* (Paris: Karthala, 2001), 227.