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BBC and Genocide in Rwanda: Conflict of Competence over Post-Genocide Narrative

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RICHARD BENDA, NOV 17 2014

Back in February this year, Chris Mullin introduced his review of David Belton's book (Belton, 2014) with these words: 'My first reaction when confronted with David Belton's book was to ask what is to be gained from yet another book retelling the horrors of the Rwandan genocide? A part of me still feels that way...' On 1 October 2014, in the space of one hour, the BBC 2 documentary *Rwanda: The Untold Story* dispelled any thought that the story of the Rwandan genocide has been exhausted. In fact, the documentary content and the ensuing controversy demonstrated there is still much to hear, much to tell, and much more to learn about what happened. To borrow a phrase from one of the contributors, the gap between 'what the world believes and what actually happened' still needs to be bridged.

Immediately upon its airing, the documentary generated controversy that must have shocked and delighted the producers and the BBC in general, depending on what had been their intentions. [1] The documentary drew praise and criticism in equal measure, both from Rwanda and Rwandans, as well as from the Diaspora and foreigners. A quick look around the web and other media outlets indicates the controversy shows no sign of abating. That this controversy is still raging is not an unwelcome situation. What is troubling is the extreme polarity of the reactions, at times with little regard for the actual issues raised in the documentary and precluding any form of middle ground or room for constructive debate. In other words, *Untold Story* is either good or bad, depending on who is commenting.

As my grid of praise and criticism shows, many other people have undertaken the task of discussing the different issues raised by the documentary. My contribution focuses more on the documentary as an instance of 'storytelling'. It attempts to explain this heavily polarised controversy by focusing on 'Rwanda 94' [2] as a 'narratable story'. I will first dismiss the idea of 'untold-ness'. I will then proceed to demonstrate what should be considered as novelty in the documentary. However, the crux of my argument is that the current polarised debate results from a 'conflict of competence' in owning the story of, and accounting for, the Rwandan tragedy. I finish by teasing out features of the documentary that could contribute to a new phase of national dialogue in post-genocide Rwanda.

An All Too Familiar Story

This documentary is available online and easily accessible, therefore I will provide a synopsis. *Untold Story* operates from the premise that, as far as 'Rwandan 94' is concerned, there are two sides to the story or two versions of one story. First, there is a twenty-year-old version known globally: that between April and July 1994, following the shooting down of President Habyarimana's plane, Hutu extremists began the systematic extermination of the Tutsi. Official figures speak of more than one million victims. The genocide was stopped by the RPF, under the leadership of current president, Paul Kagame. In the past twenty years, he has overseen what has been described as a miraculous transformation of Rwanda from a violent and poor society to a more peaceful country and the fastest growing economy in Africa. However, in the lesser known version of the story – the *untold story* – this same man is alleged to have ordered the shooting down of the presidential jet, the spark that lit the fire of genocide according to the presenter; presided over the massacre of hundreds of thousands of Hutu civilians in Rwanda and the former Zaire (DRC); used the genocide of Tutsi as a means to securing Tutsi return to power; and currently rules the country with an iron fist, without any tolerance for dissent.

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Those relatively familiar with the Rwandan genocide will have noticed immediately that the 'untold' tag is purely for publicity purposes. As another documentary aired in the same period demonstrates, the BBC is rather fond of this catchy title. The dichotomy between the 'official' story and the 'other' story is all too familiar in post-genocide narrative. Most of those who reacted positively to the content of the documentary, such as Rudasingwa, Herman and Peterson, Mugenzi, Ndagijimana, Kamanzi, and Reyntjens, to name but a few, agree with its critics such as Melvern and Wallis that there is nothing new in the issues raised within the documentary. The allegations levelled against Paul Kagame and the RPF have been present in the media and scholarship for nearly as long as the genocide itself.

Similarly disputed has been the claim that the RPF stopped the genocide. [3] The documentary even adopts, regrettably, the now standardised stance that sees politics in post-genocide Rwanda as a one-man show, in which Kagame is both the hero and villain. Speaking on radio *Itahuka*, Rudasingwa was right to suggest that the main theme of the documentary is less the Rwandan genocide and more a dissection of Kagame's leadership. (113'1''-115') Equally habitual are the accusations of genocide denial and/or revisionism that the Rwandan government, survivors' groups such as IBUKA, and other proponents of the orthodox narrative levelled against the BBC.

Although I said that my contribution will not engage most of the themes of the documentary, I recognise that the issue of genocide denial/revisionism is too important to sidestep. Having watched *Untold Story* three times, basic fairness compels me to acknowledge that the documentary does not entertain genocide denial. The BBC has been quick to reject these accusations. Even Stam and Davenport, their unsubstantiated statistical claims notwithstanding, do not deny the genocide. It is important to note that scholars such as Wallis and Reyntjens, who are on opposite sides of this debate, share the concern about these claims. However, what is undeniable is that *Untold Story* is an instance of revisionism. Yet, as historian McPherson argued, revisionism is what makes history vital and meaningful:

Revision is the lifeblood of historical scholarship. History is a continuing dialogue between the present and the past. Interpretations of the past are subject to change in response to new evidence, new questions asked of the evidence, new perspectives gained by the passage of time. There is no single, eternal, and immutable "truth" about past events and their meaning. [4]

Authors of critical studies of Holocaust denial, such as Lipstadt, Shermer, and Grobman, distinguish between denial and revisionism. Legitimate revisionism, they argue, entails a refinement of existing knowledge about a historical event, not a denial of the event itself. It can be argued that this is what *Untold Story* tries to achieve, as is implied in the title.

On the other hand, one cannot escape the impression that the documentary supports the theory of genocide by provocation or retributive genocide. [5] This justification follows a questionable but clearly set out logic: the Rwandan genocide would not have happened, or would not have reached its macabre proportions, had Habyarimana's plane not been shot down. President Kagame ordered this act, therefore he and the RPF are directly implicated in starting the genocide, and Hutu *genocidaires* were left with no other option but to exterminate the Tutsi. I would suggest that the programme also makes a strong case for a 'double genocide' by establishing continuity and a juxtaposition between the genocide of Tutsi, and the massacres of Hutu populations in Rwanda and in the DRC, as well as seemingly endorsing the questionable statistics provided by Stam and Davenport.

After this necessary parenthesis, let me return to the main focus of my contribution.

Untold Story: A 'Duty' to Break the Mould

Since the content of the documentary is nothing new, the question is, what is unusual in this documentary to have roused such a polarised controversy within the many interest groups with varying stakes in what Reyntjens called 'Genocide capital' (in the documentary)? I would strongly suggest that the novelty of the documentary is the BBC's unprecedented decision to authorise a programme that challenges the official version with regards to the Rwandan tragedy. The BBC has said that it had the 'duty' to make the programme. I would argue that this step was not only significantly out of character for the BBC, but it was also clearly dissonant with the UK's political orthodoxy with

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regard to Rwanda since the new Rwandan regime came to power in 1994.

Mugenzi pointed out that this is not the first documentary produced by the BBC on the Rwandan genocide, as evidenced by this list of films and documentaries on the event. However before *Untold Story*, BBC documentaries had endorsed the 'accepted' narrative on genocide, following a template laid down by eminent investigative journalists such as Fergal Keane. The documentary breaks this mould and it is this new departure that seems to be at the heart of the raging debate.

This position is supported by the reactions from both the Rwandan opposition in the Diaspora and the Rwandan President. In a speech before the Rwandan Senate on 14 October 2014, the President castigated the BBC for failing to uphold its own values, contradicting their initial version of the genocide story, and giving a platform to terrorists. He compared the BBC to the infamous RTLM and wondered whether the BBC would give a platform to terrorist organisations such as ISIS, all in the name of the freedom of speech and expression. [6] On the significance of the BBC in the controversy, opposition spokesperson Rudasingwa countered that quite apart from the fact that the documentary tells the 'truth', the President's tirade (*'ururondogoro'* – 'unduly pejorative' in Kinyarwanda) was prompted by the fact that the documentary was produced by the BBC,

the radio of the British... the same British who had been and remain some of the strongest supporters of the [Kagame] regime; now they are the ones saying these things; this is what has prompted his rancour.' (*Itahuka*, 58'54"-60'28").

However, I would argue that the controversy around the BBC's story points to a bigger issue, namely who is the owner or the keeper of the story of the Rwandan genocide? The controversy is nothing short of a conflict of competence in telling that story and shaping the narrative of its legacy.

Rwandan Genocide Story: Conflict of Competence

There is no possible dispute over which story has dominated Rwandan society in the past two decades. The story of the genocide against the Tutsi has dominated public and private life. It has been the background and the subtext of discourse, policy, and social interaction. It propelled Rwanda, an otherwise tiny and obscure country, onto the international scene where it is now enshrined permanently in the annals of human history.

Eltringham (2003, 2004) and Straus (2006), among other capable scholars, have alluded to the difficulty of accounting for the Rwandan genocide. Initially, this task was made difficult by the lack of Rwandan voices in telling the tale of their tragedy. In academia, this lack of native voices was laid bare by the State of Research carried out by Lemarchand for the *Online Encyclopaedia of Mass Violence*. As for the lack of individual life stories, the emotional predicament of most Rwandans, especially survivors, made conceptualisation difficult, whilst basic needs trumped the desire for understanding or telling. [7] There was also the issue of linguistic barriers to reach an international audience. For these reasons, the story of the Rwandan genocide has been conveyed through the mediation of 'outsiders', especially western journalists, academics, relief workers, and politicians.

However, this mediated story was carefully controlled by a Rwandan authority, namely the RPF cadre. Having won the war and credited with stopping the genocide, the two components of the Rwandan story according to David Newbury, the RPF became the *de facto* guardian and supreme authority of this particular story. Pottier has shown that the RPF political elite used strategies of information control and western moral sympathy to shape and sponsor an 'official' narrative of events that took place in Rwanda between 1994 and 1997. [8] This version of the Rwandan story was disseminated through the above-mentioned Western sources. Thus, a story that has always had two sides to it was shaped in such a way that one side – the genocide and its victims – gained more notoriety than the other: war and its victims. This situation developed not only because of what the RPF and western sources chose to tell, but also in response to what intended audiences were prepared to hear, tolerate, and accept.

However, from the beginning there were dissenting voices among these 'intermediary storytellers'. Pottier argued that voices against the 'official' story were likely to be found in Continental Europe, whilst its supporters hailed mostly from the Anglo-Saxon bloc (*Re-Imagining*, Chapter 2). Over the past twenty years, those geographical divisions have

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vanished, but the duality – verging on polarity, in most cases – has not truly relented. Two clearly defined camps have formed around the Rwandan story. One camp holds that the 'genocide' side of the story takes priority over the 'war' side; the other camp wishes to see both sides of the story given equal consideration. There has been a growing 'war of narratives' between the two camps. Accusations of revisionism and denialism crisscross with counter-accusations of co-option and compromise, each camp censoring the other; members of one group excommunicating members of the other from the community of concerned scholars and experts on Rwanda. With this tableau in mind, the current polarised debate after BBC's *Untold Story* is self-explanatory.

Beyond and above these not so friendly academic disagreements, two aspects of the Rwandan genocide story remained constant for a long time. The RPF-led government remained in control of the narrative, whilst most of the media outlets in Britain (and America) remained supportive of the 'official' version of the narrative. Two new elements came to offset a seamless continuity. The first was the publication of the Mapping Report on the never ending war in the Eastern Congo and the breaking of ranks within the RPF. Congolese and Tutsi dissenters joined forces with Hutu opposition in the Diaspora, which never managed to gain credibility in any meaningful way; even after the trial and imprisonment of a key figure like Victoire Ingabire. The combined actions of these actors and factors intended to challenge the credibility of the RPF regime and its leader. Once the 'source' was contaminated, the official narrative could not escape scrutiny. Increasingly, the Rwandan opposition in the diaspora has 'reverse engineered' the technique honed by the RPF of using sympathetic academics and media outlets to achieve their political agenda. In this respect, having the BBC's *Untold Story* endorse their views has to be considered as a major coup.

The BBC claimed that the documentary was born out of a duty to investigate the Rwandan story; Rwandan authorities considered it a betrayal and a breach of trust. However, what truly angered Rwandan authorities is the audacity of the BBC to put forth an alternative story. This new departure is felt as a transgression, a trespassing of the boundaries of 'narrative' competence, and a challenge to the authority of the Rwandan state and people in matters regarding their history. In the act of producing *Untold Story*, the BBC conferred to itself a 'jurisdiction' that belongs to no one else but the Rwandan people, as President Kagame made clear:

Why am I saying this? I am saying this to remind you Rwandans that nobody owes you a thing. You are on your own, you should own it. You should own your story. You should own everything about you. You should shape it the way you want, the way you deserve. Do not wait for these cynics (14/10/2014, par.12).

The President also made it clear that it was not the role of the BBC to decide who is a reliable witness about the Rwandan genocide, nor is it its place to say who and what is to be believed about Rwanda's recent history. In the president's mind, this interference reflects a kind of colonial arrogance and a lack of respect for African experiences, including genocide.

And this is done simply because we are Rwandans and Africans. I am sure BBC cannot produce a similar documentary referring to what happened in Bosnia for example. It cannot dare doing [sic] the same thing with [the] Holocaust. But since it's about Rwanda and Africa, they do it; that's what they did to us this time (14/10/2014, par.11).

These comments might be intended to put the BBC on the defensive or force it into endless introspection, but it is impossible to ignore how relevant they are in the case of Rwandans and their ownership of the genocide narrative. Of course, this is relevant as long as 'Rwandans' stand for all Rwandans, not just representative of the political elite or a select few.

It is impossible to shake the impression that over the past twenty years, most Rwandans have felt like Ulysses in the court of the Phaeacians: listening, incognito, as a blind rhapsode sings the tale of his Trojan exploits and subsequent ordeal. Overwhelmed with emotions at hearing his story told by a stranger, Ulysses cries and gets to tell his story (Odyssey, Book 8). Reactions to the issues raised by *Untold Story* show that more and more Rwandans want to speak of themselves rather than being spoken about, to tell their complex story instead of merely listening to it. We might be coming to a time when the monopoly of the RPF-led government and the accounts of intermediary storytellers are no longer satisfactory. The issues raised by *Untold Story* call for a serious quest for a shared version

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of the story, one in which responsibility is distributed fairly and all victims are acknowledged.

In her book *Relating Narratives* (Routledge, 2000), Adrianna Cavarero argued that for the 'narratable self', there is always a 'necessary other' and the story of one narratable self implies that this necessary other also has a story. Similarly, in the case of Rwanda, the official story of genocide and Tutsi victims should invite the less-told story of war and Hutu victims. For that, Rwandans need a better platform than a contentious documentary. However, without the BBC taking this unprecedented step, would these different conversations be taking place? Who is to tell that the end will not be better than the beginning?

Conclusion: Untold Story, a Timely Reminder?

If there is one important lesson to be learnt from *Untold Story* and the ensuing controversy, it is that in matters of the stewardship of the Rwandan genocide's legacy, we must tread carefully. Told or untold, known or unknown, the story of the Rwandan genocide still rouses raw passions and powerful emotions. Anyone who might have thought that twenty years have dulled these feelings in any substantial way must think again. Maybe this is one of the redeeming features of the documentary: to remind Rwandans and humanity at large that the wound inflicted to this country is still deeply felt, that its legacy will linger for generations whilst its story must be handled with delicacy and responsibility.

This was also a reminder that although 'Rwanda 94' was a human tragedy, the most immediate stakeholders are Rwandans. This is a Rwandan story, a Rwandan chapter in the great book of human tragedies. Therefore, it is their responsibility to tell it to one another, to weave it in dialogue and project its shape toward a horizon of truth and peace. In his address to Rwandan communities gathered in London on 21 October 2014, President Kagame told the audience that his mandate is to remind them about their responsibility to own their story, their history, and their destiny. Whether BBC's not-so-untold story reminded the President of his mission, only he knows, but as he said himself, certain reminders can be painful (segment23'-24') and this controversial documentary was certainly one of them.

As for the veracity of the claims made by different contributors in the documentary, the verdict should be rendered by a Rwandan Truth Commission, not bickering 'experts', selective witnesses, and politicians with a plethora of vested interest. *Untold Story* was a reminder that the quest continues, therefore it should not be dismissed offhand. To reprise the words President Kagame uttered before the Senate, the highest seat of Rwandan people's representation, 'The worst crime a leader can commit is to lie; lie to his people in order to serve his own interests.' (14/10/2014. Par.14) Rwandans are waiting for the whole truth to come out. In the meantime, they will be sustained by his promise of stability, prosperity, and security (14/10/2014. Par.28).

Notes

Whenever I cite a time-stamp, whether I put 'segment' before the time-stamp or not, I refer to the copy of the 'source' as it provide by the online link provided.

[1] For details on the making of the documentary, see what producer Director John Conroy has to say at The Making of Rwanda's Untold Story.

[2] 'Rwanda 94' is a referential concept that I coined to express the complex context of war and genocide immediately before April and after July 1994. In reference to the genocide against Rwandan Tutsi, I use the terms 'Rwandan genocide' or simply 'genocide'.

[3] See, among others, Pierre Péan, 2005; Serge Desouter, 2007; JMV Ndagijimana, 2009; Charles Onana, 2009, John Erlinder, 2013; Herman and Peterson; 2010.

[4] James McPherson, 'Revisionist Historians' in Perspectives on History, September 2003.

[5] On retributive genocide, an original text to read is Vahakn Dadrian, *A Typology of Genocide*, 1975. Dadrian

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identified five “ideal types” of genocide, based mainly on the primary objective of the perpetrator: 1) cultural genocide, aiming at assimilation; 2) latent genocide, a by-product of war; 3) retributive genocide, localized punishment; 4) utilitarian genocide, to obtain wealth; and 5) optimal genocide, aiming at total obliteration.

[6] A video of the speech is available at this link. The English transcript is available at this link. Subsequent reference to this transcript will indicate the appropriate paragraph.

[7] On this state of silence, see, for instance, Susan Nieman, *Evil in Modern Thought*, 2004, for the case of the Holocaust; and Mario Aguilar, *Theology, Liberation and Genocide*, 2009, for a Latin American perspective.

[8] See Johan Pottier, *Re-Imagining Rwanda. Conflict, Survival and Disinformation in the Late Twentieth Century*. Cambridge: 2004. Chapters 2 and 3 are the most relevant to my argument.

References

David Belton, *When the hills ask for your blood: A personal story of Rwanda and genocide*. Doubleday: 2014.

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