

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

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Erin Jessee. *Negotiating Genocide in Rwanda: The Politics of History*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. pp. 302. ISBN 9783319451947.

In her new book, *Negotiating Genocide in Rwanda: The Politics of History*, Erin Jessee employs a candid analysis of oral history interviews conducted with Rwandans from different backgrounds, to untangle the complex relationship between these Rwandans and official narratives about genocide that has emerged in Rwanda. In so doing, Jessee draws upon her impressive knowledge of Rwandan history, as well as her personal experiences with the Rwandan government, the research permit process, and local gatekeepers from fieldwork conducted in 2007-2008 and 2011-2012, which provide essential subjective context for the interview material analyzed. Her historical knowledge enables her to dissect the official narratives as compared to the way these histories are remembered by her interviewees. Jessee's aim is "to complicate what is commonly held true about post-genocide Rwanda and its past by analyzing the often contradictory life history narratives of Rwandans from a range of backgrounds." (23)

In the introduction, Jessee reviews Rwanda's pre-colonial and colonial history to contextualize the oral histories and official narratives which she analyzes as part of her book. She places the current development of official narratives of the 1994 genocide against the backdrop of the varying ways that local interviewees relate to pre-colonial kingships in Rwanda and life under Hutu extremist presidents Gregoire Kayibanda and Juvenal Habyarimana. Her fieldwork reveals that "Rwandans draw upon past and present official narratives, inherited memories, and personal experiences, as well as a range of external social and political factors in different ways," (23) often reflecting political agendas that are common to those who identify as survivors, and to returnees who are often members of the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF).

Chapter Two and Chapter Three discuss state-funded memorials in Rwanda. Jessee interviewed guide staff at the Kigali Genocide Memorial and the other state-funded memorial sites in Rwanda, seeking to understand their relationship to official histories of the genocide, and to determine how the guides relay information to external visitors. She notes that the guides at the state-funded memorial sites strongly link the purpose of their work and of the Kigali Genocide Memorial to the struggle for national unity and reconciliation. Although early sites of memory established in 1995 and 1996 recognized Hutu, Tutsi, and Twa victims of genocide, the state-funded memorials today only remember Tutsi victims, as official narratives posit that genocide was perpetrated specifically against the Tutsi. Jessee argues that some stories of Hutu and Twa victims have

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been lost. She also argues that a more balanced discussion of responsibility of the genocide, beyond blaming the international community and Hutu masses for the genocide, would be beneficial, especially were it to be incorporated into the memorial museums and sites, such as the Kigali Genocide Memorial and Murambi, which have historical exhibits similar to that of a Western museum. Finally, in these chapters, Jessee concludes that memorial staff rarely complicate their guided stories, and that their interpretations of the genocide and post-genocide period generally align with the official narrative.

Chapters Four, Five, and Six take up the life histories of genocide survivors (Chapter Four), convicted *génocidaires* (Chapter Five), and returnees (Chapter Six). These life histories show diverse relationships to the official narratives and the politics of history in Rwanda. Jessee concludes that genocide survivors' stories complicate the official narrative. She approached survivors as "complex political actors...as victims who are no longer chained to characteristics of innocence and purity, but remain victims nonetheless." (119) The survivors have specific interests in post-genocide justice, including healing and reconciliation. Some survivors have "learned" not to tell certain aspects of their stories. For example, Jessee relays the testimony of one interviewee who confessed that she had been a sex slave in a forced marriage with a member of the *Interahamwe* (a Hutu extremist paramilitary group, mostly comprised of youth). After the genocide, this interviewee found that she was stigmatized in her community because her experience did not fit within the story that was being promoted in official spheres. She therefore stopped discussing this part of her past. Jessee concludes that many survivors do not believe that the official reconciliation programs will work, and that it's just a matter of time before the *génocidaires* finish what they had started. She reaches this conclusion, further, because of the collectivization of guilt that has taken place with the development of the official narrative in Rwanda.

Chapter Five analyzes oral histories conducted with genocide perpetrators in five prisons in Rwanda. Jessee states that most of the Hutu *génocidaires* whom she interviewed had a negative view of life before colonization, under the Tutsi *mwami* (king), and that the systems in place constituted a form of mass Hutu oppression. They remember the Kayibanda and Habyarimana regimes positively, and state that in 1994, the genocide came as a shock to them. The *génocidaires* suggest that they were inculcated by the anti-Tutsi propaganda that was present beginning in October 1990, when the Rwandan Patriotic Army (RPA) invaded Rwanda and began the civil war. Most prisoners said that they had not wanted to participate in the killing of their Tutsi neighbors; some said that they had been pulled in by coercion or for self-protection, i.e., so as to not be killed themselves if they didn't join in. Jessee also discusses cultural tropes significant in Rwanda, one of which was to murder in groups, as having "bad blood" of innocent civilians on the hands of individual Rwandans would haunt those individuals.

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When murdering in groups, although these individuals remained complicit in committing genocide, they did not see themselves as having murdered or as having participated in the drawing of “bad blood.” This helps minimize their sense of their own guilt. Jessee’s analysis includes a discussion of the methodological challenges of interviewing prisoners: they tried to convince her that their position on their history was correct, and to seek her sympathy. As a researcher, Jessee had to manage this experience. She explains how it helped to know the context of Rwanda and to be able to identify the reasons why genocide perpetrators she interviewed in prisons interpret the past differently than genocide survivors or returnees. She also discusses difficulties in entering the prisons, as she had to receive official permits were time-consuming to receive; however, once she entered the prisons (with permission), she found that the prisoners were willing to speak to her. They did this to break up the monotony of their day, as well as to try and convince her of the truth of their perspectives about pre-genocide history and what took place during the genocide period in 1994.

Chapter Six discusses returnees to Rwanda, mostly those Tutsi who fled Rwanda before the genocide, and returned for various reasons after. Some returnees came back as part of the RPA and Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) liberation movement, to fight against the Hutu extremist government and the *génocidaires*. Others came back to help their country, or to try and find family members who might have survived the genocide. Returnees often feel very dedicated to the rebuilding of Rwanda, even if this new Rwanda is not the same as their home once was. Jessee states that it is returnees who often hold the most political power in post-genocide Rwanda. As they often serve as gatekeepers or in national and local positions of power, they could enable or halt her research progress. Negotiating her research permits with the Rwandan government was challenging, and at any point she could be asked to leave the country or her research permit could be revoked. On one visit, she was allowed into Rwanda but was not allowed to talk to anyone or conduct any interviews during this stay.

Chapter Seven addresses silences in terms of the official narrative in Rwanda, namely the non-representation of Hutu survivors and Tutsi perpetrators, and the challenges that the indigenous Twa face when organizing and advocating for their rights in the post-genocide period. Due to methodological constraints, including the fact that many people in these situations would not self-identify and would possibly refuse to speak to a researcher even if they were identified, this chapter is of limited validity: there were simply not enough data for triangulation and verification. However, based on her direct observation, Jessee makes a strong case that these stories are completely omitted from the official narrative in Rwanda, and are even silenced.

Jessee grounds her conclusion in the famous TED talk by Chimamanda

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Ngozi Adichie, “The Danger of a Single Story.”<sup>1</sup> (237) She states that the interviews she conducted for her fieldwork complicate official narratives by presenting other narratives and relationships to the history that have not been recognized in the official sphere. For example, prisoners who remember life under the Kayibanda regime as positive challenge the story that he was a corrupt and oppressive leader, specifically targeting Tutsi in limiting their access to employment and education. She further states that although survivors expressed unanimous gratitude to the RPF for having ultimately stopped the genocide, they also “acknowledged substantial challenges in the post-genocide period that they believed were preventing the nation from successful reconciliation”(251). Jessee concludes by asking whether genuine social repair is possible in the face of such competing narratives. She is skeptical when a single story becomes dominant, as has been the case in Rwanda.

*Negotiating Genocide in Rwanda: The Politics of History* presents a critical and insightful analysis of the politics of history in post-genocide Rwanda. Jessee’s reflection on her own challenges in the fieldwork process in Rwanda strengthens her analysis of life histories conducted with genocide survivors, memorial staff, genocide perpetrators, and returnees to Rwanda. This book is best suited for readers who have experience or prior background in Rwandan history because it presents more complicated frameworks, aspects of history, and narratives about post-genocide Rwanda. However, for readers who have a basic familiarity with Rwandan history and the history of the genocide this book will provide a fascinating and refreshing look at the politics of history present in Rwanda, and a nuanced view of the challenges of confronting official narratives that have arisen since 1994.

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<sup>1</sup> Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. “The Danger of a Single Story.” TED: Ideas Worth Spreading. July 2009, [www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda\\_adichie\\_the\\_danger\\_of\\_a\\_single\\_story.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story.html).