



The Colonial Legacy of Violence: A Comparative Study of the Nigerian-Biafra War and the Rwandan Genocide



Madison Vaughn, History Department
Mentor: Dr. Daniel Lewis
RSCA 2024

Introduction:

European colonialism on the African continent perpetuated cycles of violence and divisionism that repeated themselves in the post-colonial period. During the colonial period, the European intention in Africa was to extract material gains from the continent through the exploitation of the people and resources on the continent. Consequently, the European colonial governance instituted regimes of difference, perpetuated through systems of violence to institute order under their superiority. The colonial control over political and social institutions worked to degrade the African people both mentally and physically. Physically, this included forced labor and displacement, along with intensive repression to maintain absolute hegemony over the colonized peoples and avoid social and political strife against the colonial power. Mentally, this included ethnic divisionism and social classification to maintain the confines of power over particular groups. Additionally, it meant the mental degradation of the African people. The colonial power worked to instill African inferiority, both within the social structures of the colonially-bound African states and in comparison to the European colonial heads within the region. The institutional features of the European administration exacerbated conflicts between ethnic groups competing for power and resources within the respective colonies. In the post-colonial era, this resulted in weak states fragmented by ethnic conflicts and power struggles.

The lasting implications of colonial violence are highly prevalent in the Nigerian-Biafra War and the Rwandan Genocide, where cycles of violence first maintained by the colonial powers were repeated by Africans in their post-colonial independent states, mainly as ethnic violence. European colonialism in Africa created ethnic distinctions to organize and divide the peoples of each ethnic group into categories that best suited the colonial power. The socio-political nature of colonial institutions and policies contributed to ethnic division that eventually manifested into violence in the post-colonial period. Following independence, the nations of Nigeria and Rwanda inherited the legacy of colonial political, social, and identity development, which propagated into intense divisionism and colonial mentalite. The Nigerian-Biafra War and the Rwandan Genocide are stark examples of this legacy.

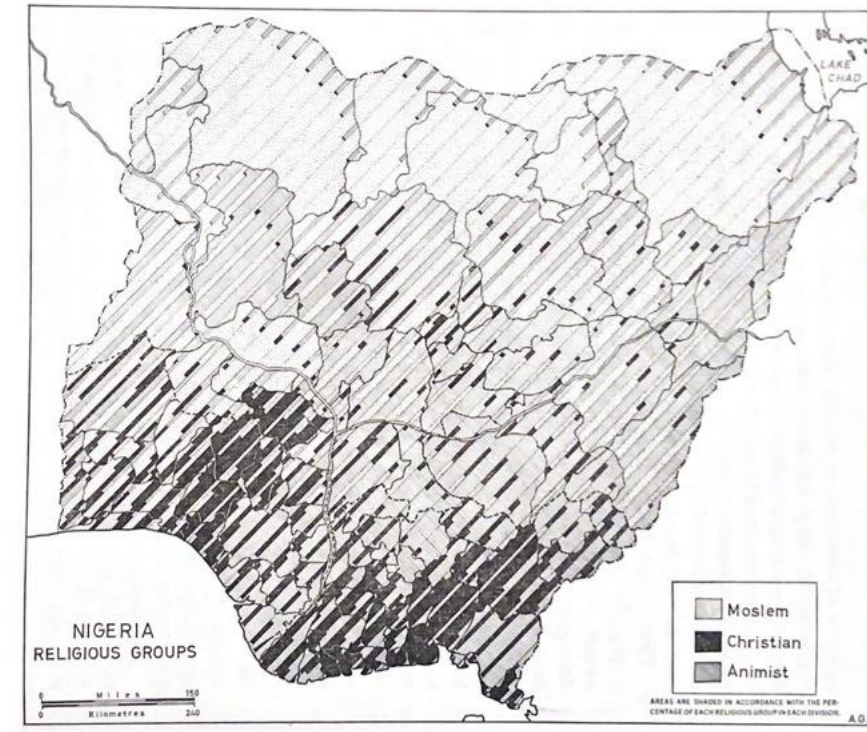
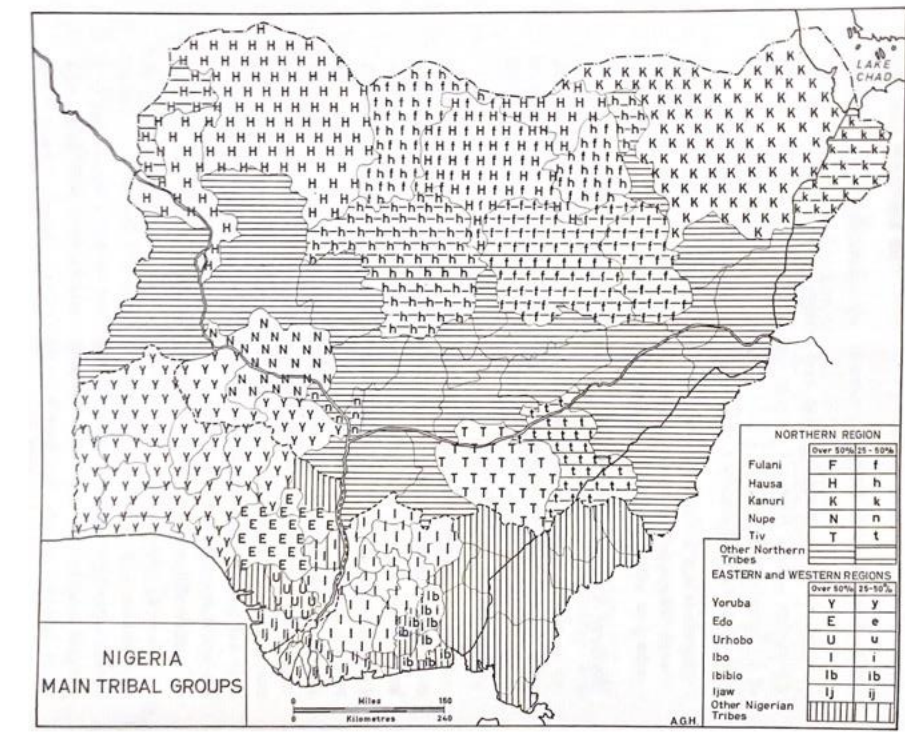
To establish power in various multi-ethnic states in Africa, European colonizers played off pre-existing notions of physical and cultural differences to establish ethnic distinctions into systems of power and control. This division plays a key role in the development and shaping of ideology amongst the political and social actors in Nigeria and Rwanda in both the colonial and post-colonial eras, especially concerning ethnic identity. As stated by Okwudibia Nnoli, "Ethnicity in Africa emerged and persisted either as a mechanism for adaptation to the imperialist system or as an instrument for ensuring a facile and more effective domination and exploitation of the colonised"

The Nigerian-Biafra War and the Rwandan genocide share many similarities in terms of their violence and how each conflict played out. The similarities give insight into the overarching colonial legacy in Africa and its role in the manifestation of intercommunal violence. It points to key connections between colonial institutions, including the degradation of precolonial African society and key reorientations of societal and political life structured around ethnicity and race. The distinction between the violence in Rwanda versus Nigeria articulates how the different forms of colonial rule and the resulting political and social structures in each country contribute to the nature of violent conflict in Nigeria and Rwanda.

Nigeria:

Colonial Administration

Prior to European control of the region that would become Nigeria, the region consisted of over 250 distinct ethnic groups. Upon acquisition of the region, the British colonial government sought to form a unified, nationalist country. However, though the period was relatively peaceful, the distinct ethnic groups living in Nigeria found greater affinity in their own ethnic groups affiliation than the colonial government and nation group. Prior to British control, four primary ethnic and religious groupings existed: the Hausa Fulani were concentrated in the Northern region, the Yoruba in the Western region; the Eastern region was dominated by the Igbo, and the Midwestern region was made up of the Edo-speaking people. The British primarily entered the country through the south, bringing Western beliefs and practices, including Christianity, to the Yoruba. Due to Islamic influences that previously existed in the North, along with systems of indirect rule, the North was largely neglected in terms of educational, cultural, and technological innovations. This led to early tensions between the people of the North and South, which were further exacerbated by Southern migration into the North to acquire colonial Civil Service jobs due to the perceived backwardness, both cultural and educationally of the North.



Two Nigerians, including key leaders such as Mallam Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, later to become Nigeria's first prime minister, had faith in the unification of the differing ethnic groups of Nigeria. Around 1940, the British colonial administration split Nigeria into four separate administrative units, which largely mirrored pre-existing ethnic groups. This intensified the sense of affinity among these different groups and established systems of divisory hegemony. The regionalism under British colonialism helped to complicate the establishment of unity in the region in the post-colonial period. Because of the nature of ethnic chauvinism and sectionalism in Nigeria, the strength of the dominant political party was central to the shaping of economic and political affairs of all regions of Nigeria following independence.

Nearing the end of the colonial period, the British attempted to maintain control over a people who were increasingly desiring sovereignty from the empire. Thus, to deflect from the opposition they faced, the British redirected this tension between the different ethnic groups in Nigeria. A key example of this is the propaganda surrounding the nationwide general strikes on June 22, 1945. The nationwide general strikes presented an issue for the British due to the unifying nationalism occurring under its banner. In circulations of nationalist presses, including the *West African Pilot* and the *Daily Comet*, the colonial government blamed key Igbo leaders and peoples for engineering the strike. This accusatory propaganda led to some of the first attacks on the Igbo people by Hausa-Fulani in the North, occurring in August 1945. The sense of unity held together by the British colonial regime proceeded to unravel into political upheaval and eventually civil war, as conflict between political parties and their associated ethnic groups intensified and became increasingly blameful toward other ethnic groups.

Concluding Statement:

The established systems of colonial rule reoriented African society, uniting people and creating tension in places that were relatively peaceful in the pre-colonial period. In the Rwanda case, the Hutu and Tutsi lived rather harmoniously within the same areas. The Nigerians, in most cases, knew little about the existence of other groups, such as the isolation of the Igbo in the forests of Western Nigeria. The colonial apparatus and the development of its infrastructure, along with forced migration and labor, brought the people of these countries together that previously did not interact. These interaction, combined with the shaping of ethnic divisionism and chauvinism, was key to the disunity that manifested into civil war. Since independence in Nigeria, most conflicts, which occurred either between states, the State and its parts, the State and the people, have been settled with violence. The nature of violence during the colonial period mirrored itself in the nations that followed in the post-colonial period. The systems of violence during the colonial period formed a *mentaltie* of violence that overwhelmed systems of democracy. As African nations progress into the 21st century, they struggle to overcome the legacy of colonial violence, as seen in the continuation of repressive regimes, exploitative rule, and violent upheavals between peoples and against their governments.

The Nigerian-Biafra War and the Rwandan Genocide provide keen examples of the legacy of colonialism on the African continent. The nature of the violence that occurred in each country had a devastating and lasting impact on the people living in each nation. Both Nigeria and Rwanda continue to unravel the legacy of colonialism and the legacy of the conflicts that killed thousands of people, leaving a lasting void of ethnic decimation and exhaustion. Both countries, especially into the 21st century, have made key reconciliation efforts to establish forgiveness over anger moving forward. These efforts are key in upending the ethnic divisionism from the colonial period and overcoming the developed colonial *mentaltie*.

Post-Colonial:

While the Southern Nigerians had political and social superiority, the Northerners held greater participation in the military due "martial race" theories that saw them more fit for military service. This policy was changed in 1958, leading to greater Southern involvement in the military. Southerners who entered the military were more likely to receive promotion, which combined with accusations of electoral fraud and political corruption, including the hegemony of the northern region under British neocolonialism, contributed to the outbreak of a military coup in 1966. The military coup was at the hands of Majors Nzeogwu, Ifeajuna, and Ademoyega, who were attempting to break down the northern hegemony and the systems of corruptness that had been developing since the colonial period into the post-colonial period under the power of the NPC and NNA parties.

While the January coup was successful in the North, it failed to obtain political control in the South, where loyalist leader Johnson Aguiy-Ironsi was able to maintain power. The Aguiy-Ironsi administration performed an inquiry into the attempted coup. The report on the outcome of the inquiry found that the coup was restricted entirely to military officers, mostly from the South, and mostly Igbo. However, there was no evidence to show that the coup had any particular connection to the south, nor that it was an Igbo conspiracy against the Northern government, but rather, the three majors and their co-officers acted on their own. Though the report articulated the individual efforts of the leading officers of the coup and their separation from the Igbo and southern people, northern officials used the findings to feed into their preconceived notions on the attempted coup to place the Igbo people culpable in the coup. This, combined with disdain toward Aguiy-Ironsi's lack of political success in creating administrative reform in the country, led to a wave of coordinated riots on Igbo peoples living in northern cities, especially following the overthrow and murder of Aguiy-Ironsi in July 1966.

From May to October 1966, Hausa-Fulani leaders of northern Nigeria, later to be known as the *Kaduna Mafia*, planned and executed the killing of about 100,000 Igbo across northern Nigeria and the rest of the country. Part of their goal in executing these murders was to expel the Igbo from the north's civil service and jobs and attempt to neutralize the Igbo presence in the military. The massacre led to the migration of nearly two million eastern Nigerians back to eastern Nigeria, under the administration of the Ojukwu regime. The massacre effectively divided the nation, highlighting administrative and social units that pre-dated independence.

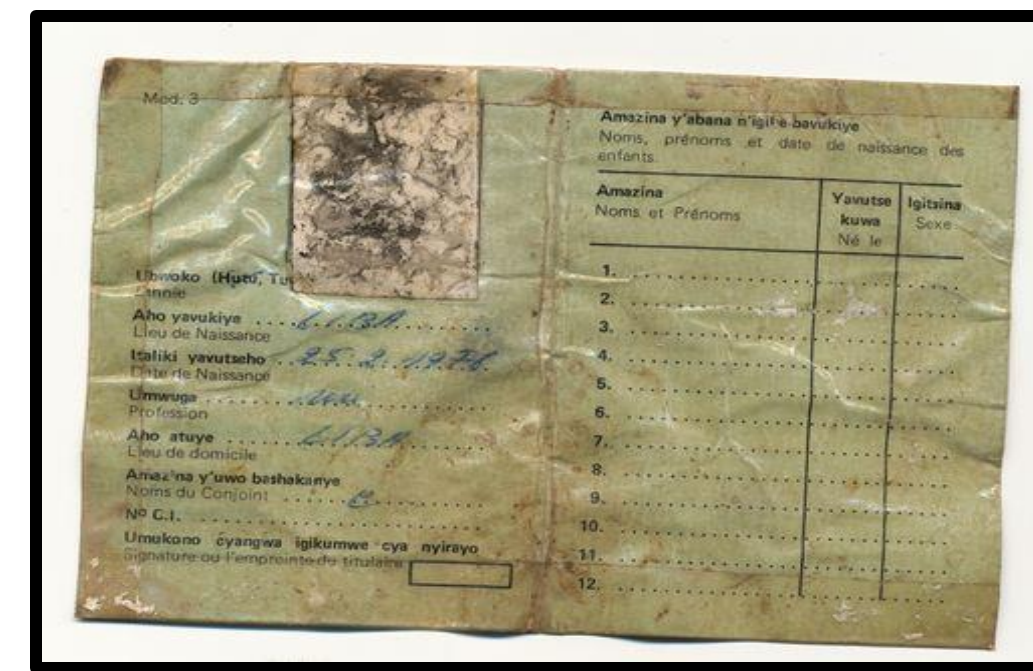
In an interview with the president of Biafra, it is stated, "Johnson had asked: "Is there a central government in Nigeria today?" Ojukwu: "That question is such a simple one that anybody who has been listening to what I have been saying would know that I do not see a central government in Nigeria today. [Following the July 1966 coup,] Nigeria resolved itself into three areas - Lagos, West, and North area; the Mid-west area; and the East area." The period of the war was marked by the division of groups into previously established groups, ones that first developed during the precolonial period, before the amalgamation, and then repeated their existence during the colonial period under the British administration. These divisions are important to understand due to the relationship they hold to both the previous period in Nigerian administration, but also the role it played in the later war. Following the massacre and the influx of nearly 2 million eastern Nigerians fleeing the North, the Ojukwu administration felt there would be radical changes in the relationship between eastern Nigeria and the main Nigerian government. On May 30th, 1967, the east declared itself independent of the Nigerian country, declaring itself Biafra. However, Biafra contained most of the economic resources and activity in the Nigerian country. Thus, the Nigerian federal government declared war on Biafra in July 1967, creating a war that lasted 30 months until the Biafran resistance collapsed in September 1969. The main war efforts by the Nigerian government involved starving nearly 10,000 Biafran daily by cutting Biafra from the country's principal food-producing provinces.

Similarly the experience of Charles Keil, a cultural anthropologist visiting and studying Biafra during the war stated, "I was escorted back to the city by soldiers who apologized for the stench and explained politely that they were doing me and the world a great favor by eliminating Ibos. "They eat dogs. they must die like dogs." Further conversations he heard with various soldiers at nightclubs, roadblocks and in barracks articulated that the Ibos were "innately evil, expendable, and exterminatable", stating "The Ibo and their ilk, " "vermin and snakes to be trod under foot, " "dogs to be killed." These descriptions articulate the nature of the language developed around the Igbo people. This language roots from colonial symptoms of ethnic chauvinism and divisionism. The propagation of this language through media and by word of mouth led to the instillment of a mental image of the Igbo people. This image made the massacre of nearly 100,000 Igbo people a more receptive concept, playing off lasting tensions arising out of the colonial period.

Rwanda:

Colonial Administration

In Rwanda, the Belgians deepened the roots of ethnicity to coincide with identity. Prior to European colonization, the Rwandan ethnic groups, the Hutu and Tutsi, lived relatively harmoniously, speaking the same language (Kinyarwanda), with the same cultural practices and shared religious centers. Further, the ethnic groupings of Hutu and Tutsi that existed in Rwanda were not fixed and could be changed based on acquisition of cattle. However, Western incursion into the country attempted to find key distinctions between the groups and create divisions that eventually manifested into violence. Colonial anthropologists focused on the *phenotypes* and *genotypes* to find distinctions in physique and blood factors to distinguish the groups. These distinctions were used to organize the Rwandan colonial administration with Tutsi hegemony, since the European powers believed the Tutsi were closer to Europeans in the evolutionary hierarchy. During Belgian rule, all Rwandans were required to declare their group identity, and were registered into local records. The Belgians also required Rwandans to carry identification cards.



Beginning in the 1920s, only Tutsi were allowed to become government officials, similar to the Southern hegemony in the Nigerian case. However, following World War Two and pressure from the UN, the Belgians worked to develop greater political representation in political representation. This led to what was known the "Hutu Revolution", with the formation of a new Hutu political class. The "Hutu Revolution" was a Belgian-backed overthrow of the Tutsi monarchy, which led to retaliations by Tutsi against Hutu subchiefs, becoming the first pieces of violence between the Hutu and Tutsi. The Revolution involved the first impulses and language of anti-Tutsi violence. Hutu leaders used the Hutu Revolution to craft a myth of Hutu oppression, marking the Tutsi as enemies of the state once the Hutu took power. The cards created and utilized by the Belgians, ones that previously guaranteed privilege to the Tutsi people, were now being utilized by the newly created Rwandan Republic to discriminate and justify violence against the Tutsi. During the Hutu Revolution, various documents were created that spread the language of Tutsi hate, including the Bahutu Manifesto created by Hutu hardliners, articulating the harsh discrimination faced by the Hutu and the need for Hutu advancement.

How can you distinguish the cockroach from the Hutu? You have several methods to choose from. The cockroach has a gap between his front teeth. The cockroach has narrow heels. The cockroach has eight pairs of ribs. The cockroach has stretch marks on his thighs near the buttocks.

The cockroach has a thin nose. The cockroach's hair is not so curly. The cockroach's skull is long at the back, and his forehead is sloped. The cockroach is tall and there is haughtiness in his eyes. The cockroach has a pronounced Adam's apple buttocks.

For Full Text and Bibliography:



Post-Colonial:

Following the Revolution, General Juvenal Habyarimana established absolute rule under a Hutu regime, which glorified Hutu power under movements such as the Mouvement Revolutionnaire National pour le Developpement, or MRND. The Hutu Revolution included the displacement of nearly 60,000 Rwandans out of Rwanda. A group of Tutsi refugees in Uganda developed the Rwandan Patriotic Front, who invaded Rwanda on October 1, 1990. Habyarimana connected this attack to all Tutsis, blaming them for any violence occurring since the Hutu Revolution.

In the Rwanda case, the language of genocide was intentionally perpetuated by the government under a Hutu regime. The ethnically divisive and degradation of the Tutsi people was perpetuated throughout the media from the national level to the local level, encouraging discrimination and attacks upon the Tutsi people. The different media sources included the RTLM (Radio- Television Libre des Milles Collines), created in 1993, *Kangura*, used primarily from 1990-1994, and other radio outlets and newspaper sources owned and directed by Hutu power extremists. These media outlets relied largely on pre-existing fears of the Hutu people to deepen their conviction toward the Tutsi people and market these fears, ones of displacement, dispossession, and violence, into blame and violence. These fears originated from the colonial period when the Tutsi hegemonized the political and social structure, displacing the Hutu people from their livelihood. These fears had been built into a generation mindset that had lasting implications for the genocide and could be utilized by extremists, especially following the attack by the Rwandan Patriotic Front and the start of the civil war. Within the media, these fears were articulated by phenotypical descriptions established during the colonial period.

Many of the physical distinctions articulated originally by colonial anthropologists and later by the Belgian government carried into the post-colonial and genocide era. Just as the media played off the fears and ideas developed about the Tutsi during the colonial period and the Hutu Revolution to perpetuate the genocide, the racial distinction articulated by the Europeans was repeated by Hutu extremists during the genocide. One example is Kantano Habimana, a commentator for the RTLM, who called for Hutu people to break the Tutsi, stating, "This is a single ethnic group. So look at a person and see their size and physical appearance [uko asa], just look at his cute little nose and then break it" As previously discussed, the colonial anthropologists and observers had articulated that one key characteristic that made the Tutsi and Hutu distinct was the thinness of the Tutsi nose. This description carried through the colonial period, used largely for identification purposes, into the language of the genocide, where it was used to identify and kill Tutsi people.

According to an anonymous interview with a Tutsi survivor done by Samuel Totten in 2008, the central government referred to all Tutsi as *inyensisi* ("cockroach" in Kinyarwanda), making statements of this nature on Radio Rwanda. This language was then repeated by military and government officials at the local. The interviewee was in a boarding school leading up to the time of the genocide. He discussed that a priest, Hormisdas Nsengimana, who was involved in the killing of thousands of people during the genocide, told a classroom of students, "You Tutsis are drunk on peace," meaning, "you are fools because you feel safe." The language of divisionism and violence was rooted deeply in the political and religious structures of the state, reminiscent of the developments that occurred during the colonial period. The establishment of this thinking carried into power struggles, such as the Hutu Power movement, that shaped the thinking of Hutu and Tutsi people alike and affected how they interacted with each other. This can be seen as simply as the use of slurs or threats, such as the ones seen above. However, as the genocide proceeded, it can be seen how the impact of decades of oppression under the Tutsi monarchy was exacerbated by the colonial Key to the nature of this is that the quote is stated by a priest to a group of students. The language of violence and divisionism was first established by the White Fathers even prior to the establishment of colonial rule. The language of violence and ethnic divisionism carried into the religion and education of the people of Rwanda, perpetuating every aspect of their lives to be connected with these distinctions. Due to the longevity of the conflict and division, it became easy for people, like this priest, to make offhand comments about the division, which made it that much easier for the government to perpetuate the genocide and encourage Hutu people to act on their accords. As described above, the physical distinction established by the colonial government was utilized by the media to describe and tantalyze the Tutsi people. Additionally, the use of slurs, such as the one for cockroaches was used by the media to describe the Tutsi. This further exacerbated Hutu feelings about the Tutsi people through the degradation of their person. Just as the colonial government had dehumanized the people of Rwanda, the media and the Rwandan government continued to dehumanize the Tutsi to convince the Hutu to commit acts of violence against their neighbor.

The language of the conflicts that occurred in both Rwanda and Nigeria perpetuate the established divisionism of the colonial model. This divisionism was exacerbated under the regimes that followed the wake of independence, carrying itself through the void created by the lack of colonial administrations. Without the rigidity of the colonial apparatus maintaining unity and control, Nigeria and Rwanda dissolved into decentralized despotism. When the absolute rulers could not maintain the rapidly decentralizing state, they marketed violence as a means of blaming one particular group for the unraveling of the socio-political conditions of the nation.