Power and Stratification in Rwanda: A Reconsideration
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Citer ce document / Cite this document :
doi : 10.3406/cea.1966.3083

Document généré le 02/06/2016
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A Reconsideration*

Since the publication of M. Fortes and E. E. Evans-Pritchard’s *African Political System*, anthropologists have drawn attention to a large variety of African societies which lack one or the other of the structural characteristics subsumed by the authors under their two major headings. In a recent issue of *Anthropologica* devoted to the analysis of power in complex societies Professor Ronald Cohen notes that the dichotomy employed by Fortes and Evans-Pritchard leaves out “a very large group of societies of different varieties, a great deal more various in fact than would be assumed from the original group A category of Fortes and Evans-Pritchard, which they use to cover all societies that have ‘centralized authority, administrative machinery and judicial institutions’.” Rwanda, as he goes on to observe is certainly a case in point.

Besides having a centralized system of authority organized along hierarchical lines, traditional Rwanda was also characterized by the existence of inferior-superior relationships between two discrete ethnic groups, a fact which has long been recognized as one of the most critical factors in the socio-political organization of this particular society. Beyond this, however, there seems to be little agreement...

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* I wish to record my indebtedness to the Social Science Research Council for their assistance while doing preliminary research for this paper, and to the Graduate Council of the University of Florida for their support while writing it.


among scholars concerning the overall effects of ethnic stratification on the distribution of power among and within Rwanda's constituent ethnic groups. No doubt, this lack of consensus reflects in part differences of opinion as to what concepts and methodological assumptions are most relevant to an analysis of stratificatory phenomena. Another and more fundamental reason is that most of the studies dealing with this area lack the time dimension necessary to an understanding of societal changes. The picture which emerges from the literature is little more than a snapshot view of Rwanda society at any given period of history. In turn, the omission of dynamic elements from their total historical context has led certain scholars to vastly oversimplify, and therefore to misinterpret, political realities. That this bias can also lead to serious contradictions can be gathered from a closer examination of the theories advanced by students of Rwanda society.

It is of course impossible within the scope of this paper to consider each theory in detail. The image of Rwanda conveyed by anthropologists emerges perhaps more clearly from the answers they give to the questions often raised by social scientists about problems of social stratification: What kinds of correlations can one discern between ethnic cleavages and the allocation of political roles? What is the nature of the boundary between the sphere of social and economic activities and that of political relations? How does one affect the other? Can one generalize about such questions without paying due attention to historical discontinuities and regional variations?

**Two Contrasting Views**

Among students of Rwanda society who have recently exercised themselves over these queries, Professor Jacques Maquet was the first to suggest a coherent set of hypotheses about the power structure of Rwanda and its relation to society as a whole. In *The Premise of Inequality in Ruanda*, Maquet presents the results of his investigation in the form of eight theorems which contain the gist of a functional theory of Rwanda society. As the title of his book suggests, Maquet's thesis is that the traditional ordering of relationships between the dominant Tutsi oligarchy and the Hutu was based on a "premise of inequality" which permeated and regulated every phase of social and political life:

"Superiority and inferiority were foci of the Ruanda social structure to such an extent that as soon as they entered as a component in the content of

a social intercourse, other components were regarded as less important and were colored by the hierarchical situation of the two actors”.

In practice this meant that all positions of wealth and influence were monopolized by the Tutsi elites, who stood towards their Hutu subjects very much like the medieval lords towards their vassals. Inferior-superior relationships were institutionalized in a clientage system (buhake) which provided for reciprocal rights and obligations between the overlord (shebuja) and his client (umugarugu). The buhake, according to Maquet, formed the keystone of Rwanda society. His main argument is that the functions it performed on behalf of the clients tended to mitigate the built-in inequalities of the feudal system. Because of the protection which the clients could expect from their lords, and also because of the complementarity of economic activities involved in it, the buhake made for some measure of social cohesion while at the same time preserving the existing caste structure.

"By that agreement almost any Hutu was linked to a Tutsi and partook in the social power of the upper caste by identifying himself with a protector who was a member of the dominant group... Through the clientage institution Rwanda constituted a unified economic system which distributed agricultural and pastoral products among the totality of the population. The personal bond with a privileged caste member, and access to possession, however precarious, of cattle, seems to have been essential from the point of view of national solidarity".

While the author admits of other factors which helped maintain social cohesion, his interpretation of the buhake as an institution involving reciprocal gratifications is clearly central to his analysis. Ultimately, since economic and political power tended to gravitate into the same hands, the clientage system also tended to set the pattern of political relations.

A particularly significant aspect of the political structure was the substitutability of roles implicit in the “feudal” organization of society. The functions devolved upon hill-chiefs, cattle-chiefs, land-chiefs, etc., were closely linked with the status hierarchy attendant upon the clientage system, so that the average office-holder would frequently combine a variety of roles. As a patron he could always use his “feudal” privileges to reinforce his authority as chief, or vice-versa; as a client of a higher chief, however, he was also made aware of his obligations towards both his superiors and his subordinates. It was this network of interlocking roles which gave Rwanda society a measure of cohesion and stability. Equally instrumental in maintaining a caste

2. Ibid., p. 150.
structure were the various agencies of socialization embedded in the political system. The inculcation of what were regarded as typically Tutsi qualities—courage (*ubutware*), manliness (*mugabo*), self-mastery (*itonde*)—was the principal function attributed to the military establishment. As Maquet points out, the armies of Rwanda were among the most powerful instruments of social control available to the upper caste. It is true of course that in some areas the military chiefs were expected to perform essentially military and administrative functions and the military skills acquired by the young Tutsi while serving their tour of duty were undoubtedly an important asset in the hands of the Tutsi to maintain their dominant position. But even more important in the long run was the role played by the army in legitimizing a *de facto* situation of inequality.

Admittedly it is difficult to do full justice to Maquet's interpretation in such a brief compass; but if one were to summarize in a nutshell the substance of his argument, one might put it in the following propositions: The "premise of inequality" was a major operative ideal in the political culture of Rwanda. Translated into concrete terms, this meant that "people born in different castes are unequal in endowment, physical as well as psychological, and have fundamentally different rights"—as well as different obligations. Implicit in this definition is the idea that inequality was accepted by its members as a "natural" condition.

Maquet's interpretation has been forcefully challenged by Professor Codere, in an article which appeared in a recent issue of *Anthropologica*. Rejecting at the outset the notion that Rwanda society was "a functioning whole continuing in time through its mutually reinforcing structures and institutions and its vast network of reciprocities which benefit and obligate everyone of its members", Codere takes the view that power alone enabled the Tutsi to exercise continuous domination over the Hutu masses. "Based on the case of Rwanda the position arrived at in this study is that power can be held and exercised by a minority against the interests and without the consent of the governed." Since power is defined by the author as "the ability of one individual to inflict harm and deprivation to one another", one must assume that the Tutsi minority kept the Hutu in bondage solely through the application or threat of coercitive measures. Unfortunately, Professor Codere does not tell the reader how the Tutsi minority, representing

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1. Ibid., p. 117. The socializing function of the army is further described by Alexis Kagame in *L'histoire des bovins dans l'Ancien Rwanda*, Bruxelles, A.R.S.O.M., t. XXV, fasc. 4, 1961.
2. Ibid., p. 165.
less than ten per cent of the total population, managed to gain and retain power over the years.

The most interesting part of Codere's analysis is that which concerns the effect of the Tutsi power struggle upon Hutu-Tutsi relations. Her reasoning runs as follows: Because of the "unremitting ferocity" which characterized personal relation within the dominant caste, the average Tutsi lived in a state of permanent anxiety "lest he be demoted from whatever position of power he held and suffer deprivation of property, status, or even life itself." In order to maximize their security within their own caste the Tutsi were naturally inclined to use their power in the most ruthless fashion, which in turn served to deter the Hutu from attempting to gain ascendancy in the political system. In other words, the use of naked power was the favorite "device" employed by the Tutsi to maintain their domination over the Hutu. Conversely,

"had the Tutsi been merely a comfortable and secure aristocracy, they might have developed slack and easy-going ways, but the brutal and relentless struggle for power among them kept them harsh and undistracted in their use of power, and thereby maximized the power they held as a group."  

The conclusion which logically follows is that the imposition of the pax belgica, by mitigating the effects of the power struggle within the ruling group, prepared the ground for a Hutu revolt.

Inferentially, Codere casually dismisses Maquet's interpretation as a "Panglossian state of affairs". Rather than seeing Rwanda as a "network of reciprocities" she sees it as a polity where relations among individuals are strangely reminiscent of Hobbes' conception of the state of nature, i.e. a society where the "more powerful oppressed the less powerful or the powerless, [where] power was used to the hilt by those who possessed it, and [where] fear and insecurity perpetuated the system." In a brief section on The Revolution in Rwanda, the author asserts that the Hutu-led revolution was a Rwandese revolution, in the sense that it was "neither inspired, created nor engineered by outside forces, Belgian, African, or any other". The overthrow of the Tutsi feudal system was the logical dénouement of a conflict of aspirations that was inherent in the socio-political structure of Rwanda, and had little if anything to do with the Belgian presence.

The area of disagreement between the two foregoing views is about

2. Ibid., p. 84.
3. Ibid., p. 82.
4. Ibid., p. 63.
as wide as that which separates the devotees of “functional” analysis from the proponents of a “power” theory of politics. As noted earlier, these differences of interpretation tend to reflect differences in the techniques of investigation employed by the authors. For instance, one cannot fail to note that Maquet’s interview schedules were communicated only to respondents of Tutsi origins, and most probably to residents of the central region of Rwanda. While there is no reason to question the sincerity of these informants, in all probability the evidence that could have been gathered from a sampling of Hutu respondents from the northern region would have brought some important qualifications to Maquet’s findings. Far more objectionable is Codere's method of investigation, based on interviews with 356 Rwandese drawn from each of the main ethnic groups. What is objectionable here is not so much the format of the interviews, and even less the sampling technique, as the circumstances under which they were conducted. To be sure, the application of interviews techniques to a crisis situation of the kind that existed in Rwanda in 1959-1960 can yield some instructive insights into people’s reactions to contemporary events. By definition, however, a crisis implies that the prevailing state of affairs is a highly abnormal one. As Codere herself admits, “a period of great tension and turbulence in a society has rarely been the setting for anthropological field work, and it was necessary to find or modify field techniques that would avoid or lessen the difficulties and profit by any advantages such a period presented”. Despite her avowed reservations concerning the feasibility of anthropological field work under such circumstances, Codere’s account of Rwanda society remains heavily colored by the emotions and racial antagonisms triggered off by the upheaval of November, 1959. Her image of Rwanda is essentially that of a society torn by civil strife and bitter hatred. As such it provides a vivid and accurate description of the revolutionary circumstances which preceded the establishment of republican rule; but it only bears a remote reaction to the sociopolitical realities of traditional Rwanda.

Yet, looking at Rwanda in a broad historical perspective, one reaches the conclusion that neither one of these interpretations automatically excludes the other. Each theory emphasizes a particular aspect of Rwandan society, circumscribed both spatially and chronologically. Maquet’s “functional” theory applies mainly to the central region of Rwanda (the seat of the “nuclear” kingdom) and reflects perhaps most accurately the state of affairs that prevailed around 1900; Codere’s interpretation, on the other hand, applies to the peripheral areas of northern and western Rwanda in the period following the German occupation of the country, but has only limited relevance to an understanding of the social and political structure of central
Rwanda prior to 1900. In order to separate the elements of truth contained in each theory from mere abstraction, one must look at some of the historical changes that have taken place in Rwanda over the last few centuries.

**Historical Perspectives**

As in the case of many other interlacustrine societies, the kingdom of Rwanda developed its present territorial base partly through conquest and partly through peaceful assimilation. The pattern of expansion seems to have been the same throughout the interlacustrine area: Under the leadership of a royal clan, successive waves of Hamitic pastoralists spread their domination over the indigenous Bantu societies, whose customs and traditions they progressively assimilated into their culture. In Rwanda this process began in the early xvith century, under the reign of Mwami Kigeli Mukobanya and lasted until the inception of the colonial era. With the annexation of northern Rwanda in 1911 the boundaries of modern Rwanda were finally stabilized to their present configuration.

According to De Lacger, the history of Tutsi expansion falls into four separate phases. The initial step involved the formation of a small nuclear kingdom in the region of Buganza and Bwanacambwe, under the reign of Ruganza Bwimbu in the xvth century. A second phase, beginning in the xvith century, brought about the incorporation of neighbouring areas into what is today the central region of Rwanda (Nduga-Marangara). With the accession of Ruganzu Ndoli to power, in the xvith century, a series of invasions were launched against formerly independent Hutu communities which resulted in the creation of a “unitary” state. Finally, in the first half of the xixth century a group of independent Tutsi states—the most powerful of which was the kingdom of Gisaka in the east—were forcefully incorporated into the national boundaries of Rwanda.

Thus, while part of this territorial aggrandizement occurred at the expense of Tutsi states, much of it was directed against autonomous Bantu societies. The important thing to stress here is that the conquest of some of these Hutu states seems to have taken place much later than was assumed by De Lacger. Indeed, recent historical research shows that the absorption of the Hutu populations of the northern and eastern “marches” began in the middle of the xvith century and continued until the early part of the xxth century. Tutsi control over the northern region (correspondingly roughly to the

former *territoires* of Ruhengeri and Biumba) was not firmly established until the 1920's, and the Tutsi drive to the north did not commence until the late xixth century, under Mwami Rwabugiri. It was the same Rwabugiri who brought the eastern region (Bugoyi, Bwishaza, Kingogo) into the fold of the Rwanda monarchy. This does not mean that these areas had no previous contacts with Tutsi pastoralists (as we shall see, the annexation of Hutu lands was often preceded by a generous infiltration of Tutsi elements); but it does suggest that the formal annexation of the peripheral Hutu areas is a fairly recent phenomenon when one considers the total span of Rwanda's historical evolution.

In order to grasp the implications of this basic historical fact, something must be said of the different patterns of assimilation brought in the wake of Tutsi expansion. Where the conquered populations were already organized under a dominant Tutsi lineage (as in the case of the Mubari, Bugesera, and Nduga areas), ethnic affinities provided a major integrative bond, and hence made for rapid assimilation. The case of Gisaka is the only notable exception: according to d'Arianoff, no less than seven expeditions were launched against the Tutsi kings of Gisaka between 1835 and 1852 before they were finally brought to heel by Rwogera's warriors1. But in those areas that were occupied by autonomous Hutu communities, the conquering tribes were confronted with an entirely different situation. Some of these communities were organized in small autonomous "kingdoms" under the leadership of a "divine" king called *umuhinza* or *umwami*. Their political structure was similar in many respects to that of neighbouring Tutsi states, and part of their rituals as well as some of their political symbols—the royal drum, for example—were subsequently adopted by the royal clans of Rwanda. Despite such similarities, the absorption of these Hutu communities into Rwanda society was undoubtedly a long and difficult task.

The consolidation of Rwandese national unity reflects a distinctive pattern of assimilation. The initial phase of Tutsi penetration was characterized by a gradual infiltration of Tutsi pastoralists among the indigenous population. Although the *buhake* had not yet been introduced into these areas, relations between Hutu and Tutsi were essentially of a commercial nature, involving the exchange of cattle for agricultural products. This period of peaceful coexistence was usually brought to an end by a series of brutal encounters resulting in the pacification of the conquered territories and the establishment of military rule. After the invasions came the implantation of an

embryonic administrative machinery. In some areas (as in the Kinyaga) army chiefs were appointed governors; elsewhere the Mwami would distribute the spoils of victory among the members of his family and his courtesans. Finally, a conscious attempt was made to achieve some measure of administrative and political unification: The Mwami would divide the provinces into districts, and the districts into *chef-feries* and *sous-chef-feries*; representatives of the Mwami were appointed in each subdivision; “royal” capitals were set up in each district and regular army contingents were dispatched to the outlying areas to maintain peace and order. It was only at this point that attempts at assimilation stood a reasonable chance of achieving their purpose.

In some areas Tutsi penetration was discouraged at the outset by the inaccessible or uninviting nature of the terrain, or because of the unfriendly dispositions of the indigenous tribes. In such cases the general pattern of amalgamation described above was usually telescoped into one or two phases, and did not last more than a few decades—sometimes even less than a decade. This is what happened in the Bushiri, Kingogo, Rwankeri and Ndorwa regions. In each of these areas the duration and intensity of contact between Hutu and Tutsi was minimal, and it was not until the early 1920’s that a unified administrative structure was finally established.

These discontinuities in the timing of Tutsi expansion account to a large extent for the variant modes of political organization encountered by the European colonizers when they first entered the country. Where the penetration of Tutsi influences was most recent, the local elites continued to be drawn from the old Hutu ruling dynasties, and the traditional political roles assigned to them remained basically unchanged. In fact, so deep was the attachment of these societies to their traditional forms of government that many of them revolted against the innovations that were subsequently forced upon them by their Tutsi overlords with the assistance of the German colonizers. In central Rwanda, on the other hand, where the long coalescence of Hutu and Tutsi had already produced a stable society, the establishment of indirect rule merely served to confirm the pre-existing dominance of the Tutsi elites.

**Patterns of Power**

With these general observations in mind we must now turn to an examination of the different types of power relationships that have

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1. For further information see *Historique et Chronologie du Rwanda* (anonymous, n.d., n.p.)
evolved in traditional Rwanda. For the sake of analysis, however, a distinction must be made at the outset between the central and the northern regions.

1. The Central Region.

The stretch of territory corresponding roughly to the former territoires of Kigali and Nyanza constitutes the “core area” of traditional Rwanda. Historically, this is where Hutu and Tutsi have the longest record of continuous contact; politically, this is where Rwandese institutions first developed and achieved the highest degree of political stability.

It was in this region that, from a “pyramidal” kingdom based on autonomous descent groups, Rwanda eventually gave birth to a highly centralized polity in which all major offices came under the direct control of the Mwami. Although one knows very little of the actual circumstances which brought about this fundamental shift in the allocation of power, the processes by which it was accomplished can be reasonably inferred from the record of other interlacustrine societies. As in Buganda, where the authority of the bataka (or clan heads) was gradually curtailed in favor of chiefs appointed by the Kabaka (the so-called saza chiefs), the Rwanda kings consolidated their power by suppressing the autonomy of local hereditary lords and by replacing them with loyal retainers—almost all of them of Tutsi extraction. One finds in Max Weber’s discussion of patrimonialism in medieval Europe an obvious parallel with what happened in Rwanda:

“The community was transformed into a stratum of aids to the rulers and depended upon him for maintenance through the usufruct of land, office fees, income in kind, salaries, and hence through prebends. The staff derived its legitimate power in greatly varying stages of appropriation, infeudation, conferment, and appointment. As a rule this meant that princely prerogatives became patrimonial in nature.”

Similarly in traditional Rwanda chiefly positions became “patrimonial” in the Weberian sense of the term, inasmuch as they were the prebends distributed by the king to retain the loyalty of his “men”.

The analogy of Rwanda with medieval Europe must be accepted with certain qualifications, however. As Gravel’s study shows, Rwanda’s political system had more in common with Japanese than European feudalism. As in medieval Japan, the complex of rights

and privileges attached to the ownership of land and cattle formed the basis of Rwanda society, and the Japanese word shiki, used to refer to such rights and privileges, including “the right of the patron, who, standing at the apex, ensures by his high position the immunity of state whether from tax or aggression”, finds an exact counterpart in the kinyarwanda term amarembo. And just as in Kamakura Japan public appointments were treated as shiki pertaining to private estates, Rwanda’s chieftaincies came to be regarded as amarembo. In short the benefices derived from clientship tended to form a tangle of mutual rights and obligations which ran through the entire political structure from the Mwami down to the most humble Hutu client.

Against this background one can better understand why clientship served as the linchpin which held the political system of Rwanda together, and why, once it was abolished, the entire structure collapsed, ushering in a bitter struggle for supremacy between Hutu and Tutsi. Since the exchange of goods and services served to express or extend political authority, a change in the economic system was bound to affect political relations. Moreover, in view of the close links between the allocation of political roles and the caste system, the abolition of the buhake was bound to destroy at the same time the structural roots of stratification.

In traditional Rwanda ethnic stratification was intimately connected with the value system and the pattern of political roles associated with it. Maquet’s discussion of the clientage system vividly shows how the ownership of cattle, as the main symbol of wealth and authority, not only served to validate lord-client relationships, but also helped reinforce the power of the Mwami. As the supreme ruler of the kingdom, the Mwami was also the ultimate owner of cattle, which he would allocate to his chiefs as carefully as the latter would to their clients. Thus, by a skillful handling of amarembo, in the form of cattle and grazing lands, the kings of Rwanda managed to set up an amazingly effective system of administration. The standard system of administration at the district level consisted in trinity of powers represented by the army chiefs, the land chiefs and the cattle chiefs, all of them appointed by the Mwami. Below this intermediary layer, power was delegated to the hill chiefs who were themselves appointed by the army chiefs. The hill chiefs would in turn appoint a group of petty functionaries, called ibilongozi, to act as intermediaries


between themselves and the local populations. As a rule the *ibilongozí* were the hill chief's favorite clients, just as the chiefs were somebody else's clients. The net result of this extraordinary fragmentation of power was to reinforce the omnipotence of the Mwami. Indeed, it is not a matter of pure coincidence that the most serious challenges to royal authority never came from the local notables but from the Mwami's own entourage.

Another important consequence of this diffusion of power at the local level is that it provided the Hutu with certain guarantees against arbitrary exactions. As Maquet points out,

"in a plural system there are several immediate superiors of approximately equal rank who are not interdependent. Consequently it is possible to have the support of one chief (or his complicity even) when resisting another . . . This is what happened in Rwanda".

On the basis of this generalization one could argue that the Hutu could always hope to secure a "fair treatment" for themselves by simply playing off one chief against the other—the *shebuja* against the hill chief, or the hill chief against the army chief. Although this is precisely what happened in my instances, the cohesion of the system as a whole did not depend exclusively on the opportunities arising from the interplay of rank and privilege among the Tutsi. Just as important, in terms of inter-caste cohesion, was the internalization of a set of values which tended to reflect and perpetuate a situation of inequality. As L. Mair observed,

"the status which the Rwanda scheme of values accorded to the Hutu was such that a Hutu who had no protector was at the mercy of any Tutsi . . . In the general insecurity of the pastoral states no person of small substance was safe without a protector, and this applied particularly to the Hutu who seem to have had no rights at all except as clients of a Tutsi who would assert his own rights in protecting them".

If the need for protection accounts for the tendency of the Hutu peasants to "commend" themselves to a lord, one must also stress the general inclination of both Hutu and Tutsi to identify social justice with power. In the value system of Rwanda might and right are but two faces of the same coin. As Gravel succinctly puts it,

"if a patron is politically powerful, the client is always certain of being right in disputes. Just as there is no word to distinguish a lie from an error, there is none that distinguishes right from wrong. If one is powerful, one is right; if one is weak, one is wrong. There is no morality involved".

Yet, to say that power is valued as an end in itself—partly because it is the base value through which other economic and social advantages can be obtained—does not imply that it will automatically be used arbitrarily, or against the interests of the lower caste. To go back to the point made by L. Mair, given the conditions of insecurity that prevailed in the traditional environment of Rwanda, it was clearly in the interests of the Hutu to seek the protection of a lord. In this connection, Codere’s argument that “protection in such a sense deserves the quote marks it is usually given in describing US gangsterism in the 20’s” does not withstand rational examination. Not only is it contradicted by the fact that in some places many Hutu continued to owe allegiance to their lords long after the introduction of political reforms, which would suggest a deep cultural commitment to status differences as a natural and proper form of social organization, but it also overlooks the restraining influences exerted through the various compensatory mechanisms described by Maquet. Another point which needs to be stressed is that once a Hutu had “infeudated” himself to a lord, if, for some reason or another, the arrangement proved unsatisfactory, he could always disengage himself from this relationship and turn to someone else for protection.

Finally, Codere’s assumption that the power structure of Rwanda was everywhere under the control of Tutsi oligarchies, and hence made the Hutu everywhere “powerless”, “oppressed” and “terrorized” is seriously opened to question. For one thing, one must remember that the structure of power at the hill level was in some ways quite different from what it was at the district or provincial level. As shown by Gravel’s study of the “play for power” in Remera (Gisaka), political competition at the local level centered around three major institutions, namely the lineage, the chieftainship and the nuclear feudal cluster, the latter being the “smallest socio-political group of the hierarchy” and consisting of the “patron surrounded by all his clients, Tutsi and Hutu, bound to him in fealty.” More often than not the chieftain was also the head of the nuclear feudal cluster, and the combination of these two roles evidently weakened the autonomy of the lineage. Yet, the evidence shows that in some cases the strength of the local Hutu lineages was such that the Tutsi found it expedient to absorb these meddlesome “upstarts” into their own caste. In a fascinating discussion of the power struggle which took place in Remera Gravel notes that “the Hutu lineages which have been in situ longest have acquired some sort of priority of rights on the hill. Their members are respected and the heads of the lineages

2. Gravel, op. cit., p. 221.
have much influence on their neighbours, and have an important voice in local administration . . . The powerful lineages keep the power of the chieftain in check. If, however, they become powerful enough to threaten the chieftainship they are absorbed into the upper caste. Their Hutu origins are ‘forgotten’ 

Another obvious qualification is that the higher echelons of the political hierarchy were not always monopolized by members of the Tutsi caste. In many instances the authority of the old Hutu dynasties continued to be recognized more or less explicitly by the kings of Rwanda. This is the situation that was to be found in the northern region of Rwanda at the inception of German colonial rule.

2. The Northern Region.

A major feature of the Bantu societies of the northern region was the diversity of their formal political organization. Small-scale centralized political kingdoms seem to have developed side by side with societies organized on the basis of autonomous lineage groups. In general, however, the heads of the ruling patrilineages (umuhinza) were the real wielders of power, and the only limitation to their authority resided in the relative strength of other lineage groups. Although nothing resembling a livestock lease contract existed among these Hutu societies, in some areas a land lease contract developed between the lineages who originally owned the land (the so-called abakonde) and those who opened it up to cultivation (the abagererwa). Thus, the abagererwa who offered a tribute in kind to the landlord in exchange for usufructuary rights over his land stood in relation somewhat similar to that of the umugaragu towards the shebuja. It is indicative of the strength of indigenous Hutu traditions that this particular system of land tenure (ubukonde)—despite its obviously "feudal" character—should still be practiced in republican Rwanda.

The patterns of relationships that have evolved between the local Hutu dynasties and the neighbouring Tutsi underwent many variations, depending on the region and period that one may wish to consider. However, taking as our frame of reference the different stages of assimilation that we already described, three major types of situations can be selected for analysis. One is the situation of peaceful coexistence which characterized the initial phase of Tutsi penetration. During this period, which in some places lasted well after the arrival

1. Ibid., p. 229.
of the Germans, the *abahinza* retained most of their powers and privileges. Some of them paid formal allegiance to the Mwami of Rwanda, and gave him the tribute that such allegiance implied; but except for such symbolic gestures, the political life of the Hutu communities went undisturbed. In the Mutara region, for example, one report notes that

"the political association of the two races was not achieved like in Rwanda [sic]. The Bahutu were under the command of their clan heads, who gathered the tribute destined to the Mwami. The Batutsi led the nomadic pastoral life which is still theirs. The family and the clan remained the basis of social and political organization".1

A rather different type of relation developed between the two groups when the Mwami of Rwanda took the initiative in curtailing or abolishing the authority of the Hutu chiefs. Although every effort was made to replace the local *bahinza* by Tutsi chiefs appointed by the Mwami, these early attempts at inaugurating a "direct" system of administration were met with considerable resistance on the part of the indigenous tribes. In Bushiru, for example, the appointment of a certain Biganda by Mwami Musinga caused a major revolt among the Bashiru. Biganda's successor, chief Mutambuka, does not seem to have been held in much greater esteem by his "constituents"; realizing how precarious his position was, he left his post only a few days after he was appointed to office.2 In Mulera a similar fate befell chief Mucocori who, after being declared *persona non grata* by the indigenous tribes, decided to abandon all political ambitions. On the other hand, the few bands of Tutsi who lived in Mulera never seriously challenged the power of the local *bahinza*:

"The situation of this group of Batutsi", says one report, "isolated in the midst of rugged and belligerent agriculturalists, induced them to adopt a great deal of prudence, moderation and diplomacy... These Batutsi remained for a long time free of all political ties".3

It was not until the Germans took over the administration of the country that something approaching a Tutsi "protectorate" began to take shape. In contrast with the state of affairs prevailing in Burundi, the purpose of German punitive expeditions was to strengthen the authority of the Tutsi elites over the indigenous populations of the north, and to suppress whatever forms of resistance this policy was likely to engender.4 Under the Belgian mandate this policy came

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to be regarded as a precondition to the establishment of a uniform and viable system of indirect administration.

During this last phase most of the bahinza were removed from office and their authority transferred to Tutsi chiefs appointed by the Belgian administration. Moreover, the role of chief was redefined in a way that rendered his “overrule” far more burdensome to his wards than he himself had anticipated. Indeed, if one were to look for evidence of coercion in the application of indirect rule, it is most likely to be found in northern Rwanda. To explain this situation, at least two specific factors should be mentioned. One is that the authority of the chiefs had no other base of legitimacy than the power of the Belgian colonizers. Only through coercion could these traditionally aloof Bantu populations be brought to comply with the demands made by the chiefs on behalf of the administration. The frequent penalties incurred by the chiefs suspected of “demagoguery” suggest that sheer compulsion was the only alternative to what otherwise would be regarded as a sign of voluntary negligence. What made the chiefs’ position especially uneasy is that they were invested with a range of functions that had no counterpart in traditional society: As agents of the administration they had to see to it that taxes were regularly paid, that crops were properly taken care of, that antierosive contour terracing was duly maintained, etc. To be sure, corvée labor of this kind was universally resented by the Hutu peasants. In the north, however, where natural resources were particularly scarce, these prestations were one of the most potent sources of hostility against the chiefs.

From this brief incursion into the history of the northern region one can draw little evidence in support of Maquet’s interpretation. Although some sort of status hierarchy existed among the different Hutu lineages, until the European penetration nothing like a caste system seems to have taken root in this area. Where roving bands of Tutsi were encountered, their relations with the Hutu were marked by a keen awareness of, and respect for, the indigenous institutions of their “hosts”. Even when sporadic attempts were made to gain formal control over the dominant Hutu patrilineages, as happened in Mulera under Rwabugiri’s reign, the lower echelons of the power structure remained in Hutu hands.

1. For example, a territorial administrator could write in a letter to the Resident of Ruanda, dated March 17, 1944: “Il est grand temps qu’un sous-chef énergique vienne rétablir la situation et que les indigènes de cette sous-cheferie soient repris sérieusement en main, le sous-chef Ruhakana ayant versé dans une sorte de démagogie consistant à ne rien demander à ses contribuables de peur de les mécontenter.” I am grateful to the sous-préfet of Ruhengeri for permission to consult his files.
**Conclusion**

The main conclusion to be drawn from the foregoing discussion is that traditional Rwanda did not form a single social aggregate, but rather an amalgam of two distinctive societies interacting with each other in different ways and at different levels. Relations among them did not exclude the use of violence, but violence *per se* does not suffice to explain the structure of action in each society. As it has been argued,

"the use of force is efficient only for a limited purpose. Force is a sanction, but never the essence of a society. A society based solely on force is a contradiction in terms that raises the classical question: *Quis custodies ipsos custodes?*"

Traditional Rwanda can best be thought of as a mixture of two distinctive types of situations—a situation of optimum functional integration, characterized by a caste structure; and a situation of "ethnic coexistence". History shows that neither one of these situations remained static. Absorption of the Hutu communities into the caste structure of the Tutsi invaders was an almost continuous process, involving a partial loss of cultural identity for the absorbed group, and its reintegration into a new system of social action. The process is described by Weber as follows:

"The caste structure transforms the horizontal and unconnected coexistences of ethnically segregated groups into a vertical social system of super- and subordination. Correctly formulated: A comprehensive societalization integrates the ethnically divided communities into specific political and communal action... Ethnic coexistences condition on a mutual repulsion and disdain but allow each ethnic community to consider its own honor as the highest one; the caste structure brings about a social subordination and an acknowledgement of ‘more honor’ in favor of the privileged caste and status groups. This is due to the fact that in the caste structure ethnic distinctions as such have become ‘functional’ distinctions within the political societalization (warriors, priests, artisans that are politically important for war and for building, and so on) ".

Weber’s distinction between "caste structure" and "ethnic coexistence" provides us with a key to an understanding of the evolving patterns of relations between Hutu and Tutsi. We have seen how,

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through various historical stages, two discrete ethnic communities were amalgamated into a single cultural matrix. What must be emphasized is that the caste structure of central Rwanda was rooted in a shared and "culturally elaborated image" of Rwanda society. This image was projected into people's consciousness through several agencies of socialization (i.e. the lineage, the army, the nuclear feudal cluster, etc.) as well as through a considerable corpus of oral traditions and literary genres. Indeed, if one were to explain why this caste structure preserved its stern rigidity longer than any other interlacustrine society, one would probably have to mention first its traditional communication structure, as there seems to be a direct correlation between the differentiation of social and political roles, both at the central and the provincial levels, and the particular types of literary expression associated with them. It is at this level that one can perhaps best analyze the relationships between the cultural and the structural roots of stratification. By way of an illustration, one could argue that what made ethnic distinctions "functional" in the Weberian sense, was not only the introduction of specific institutions like the clientage system, but also the entire body of symbols, ideas, and beliefs about the usefulness and legitimacy of such institutions. A situation of "ethnic coexistence", on the other hand, implies the absence of functional integration and the persistence of vertical cleavages among groups. Hence the feelings of "mutual repulsion and disdain" which seemed to characterize Hutu-Tutsi relations at the time of the European penetration.

This distinction is not only of mere academic interest; it is fundamental to an understanding of contemporary issues. Although space limitations do not permit a full discussion of the origins of the Rwanda revolution, one can at least draw attention to the dual nature of the motives which inspired revolutionary action. The revolution which took place in central Rwanda was a social revolution, in the sense that it developed its own dialectic from the social inequalities inherent in the caste structure. The crucial point here is that such a revolution could not have taken place unless the old particularistic, ascriptive order had already been undermined by the spread of universalistic, egalitarian, achievement-oriented values. In the north, however, this type of conflicting value-orientation was not the most important motive force behind the revolution. In seeking to evict the Tutsi oligarchy from its position of power, the northern tribes did not seek

to challenge the legitimacy of the old social order. Their main objective, on the contrary, was to revert to the political status-quo in existence before the arrival of the Tutsi conquerors, so as to regain their political autonomy as well as their cultural identity. Thus, it is one of the ironies of Rwanda’s history that in destroying the old monarchic regime the republican revolution also created the conditions for a partial revival, or a perpetuation, of feudal institutions.