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Abstract

This article argues that the mainstream (constructivist) theorizing about ethnicity should be expanded in order to take essentialist aspects that are present in the notions of “potential ethnics” into account. By focusing on the notions of “potential ethnics”, that is, in this case Rwandans and Burundians, one avoids the oversimplification that still persists in the debate about essentialist and constructivist approaches to ethnicity. Qualitative interviews conducted between September 2007 and May 2008 show that Rwandans and Burundians do not conceive of ethnic categories as either constructivist or essentialist, but that constructivist and essentialist notions exist next to each other and are strongly intertwined in the different lines of reasoning. These findings support arguments criticizing the dominant constructivist theories (about being Hutu and Tutsi) as being unable to capture the complexity of ethnic realities.

Keywords

Experienced ethnicity, ethnic realities, notions of ethnicity, essentialism, constructivism, ethnicity in Rwanda and Burundi

Carla Schraml¹

But again: Nobody knows who is Hutu and who is Tutsi in truth, in reality. Nobody knows his great grandfather, hence, nobody knows it. Sometimes, in some families, you can see one brother who is Hutu and the other brother is Tutsi. Same father, same mother, they just made a choice. (medical doctor, Bujumbura)²

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During an 8-month stay from September 2007 to May 2008 in Rwanda and Burundi, I asked Rwandans and Burundians how they – being Hutu and Tutsi – conceive of ethnicity.³ The name of the medical doctor cited above is Julien. He received me warmly and hospitably in his house in one of the better-off neighborhoods in Bujumbura, the capital of Burundi. The quote exemplifies three things that have been remarkable within the answers of most of my interviewees: (1) strongly essentialist notions are present in the reasoning of Rwandans and Burundians, relating ethnicity to descent, biology, and physical appearance; (2) these essentialist notions exist next to strong constructivist notions referring to choice, social context, education and manipulation by politicians; and (3) essentialist and constructivist notions do not only exist next to each other but are strongly intertwined in the different ways of reasoning about ethnicity.

While the academic discussion is still dominated by the struggle between essentialism and constructivism (Hale, 2004: 459), my field work supports arguments of authors such as Brubaker (2004), Jenkins (2008), and Karner (2007) who argue in favor of a reconceptualization of ethnicity based on the notions and ideas “potential ethnics” (Waters, 1990: 13) have of *their* ethnicity. Waters (1990) introduced the term “potential ethnics” since she assumed that prior to asking an interviewee about his identity, it was impossible to know whether he identified with any ethnicity or to what extent. However, based on a certain history and context, for example, politicized ethnicity and recurring violence based on ethnic affiliation in Rwanda and Burundi, the researcher may think that interviewees are “ethnics,” that is, they have an ethnic identity. This term points up in a very elegant manner what other authors have developed more explicitly. As ethnicity is a process of identification, individuals might identify with other social categories than those to which they are “deemed” to belong (Brubaker, 2004: 9; Jenkins, 2008: 15; Karner 2007: 23). Methodologically, this implies that the scientific observer has to ask for the implicit conceptions “potential ethnics” have about their ethnicity – as, for example, Gil-White (1999)⁴, Karner (2007), and Waters (1990: 13) do.

My approach to ethnicity follows these lines of reasoning and applies them to Rwanda and Burundi. Discussing ethnicity based on the notions Rwandans and Burundians *themselves* have about *their* ethnicity, and based on how *they experience* ethnicity, helps to avoid the shortfalls of essentialist as well as of some constructivist lines of reasoning (Brubaker, 2004: 9; Jenkins, 2008: 173; Karner, 2007: 23; Levine, 1999: 165; Pieterse, 1996: 27).

In this respect, my approach to ethnicity is an especially interesting one for the discussion about ethnicity in Rwanda as well as Burundi since constructivist arguments are particularly dominant in both contexts. In both cases these constructivist arguments often fail to adequately capture the complexity of ethnic realities on the ground (see Chrétien and Prunier, 2003: V; Daley, 2006: 663; Hofmeier, 2005: 2; Scherrer, 2002: 26; Waters, 1995: 343).⁵

Approaching ethnicity based on the notions of “potential ethnics” facilitates a better understanding of the complex ethnic realities, revealing that Rwandans and Burundians do not experience ethnicity as *either* constructivist *or* essentialist.

Julien, the Burundian medical doctor, on the one hand, clearly has a constructivist perspective when arguing that it is not possible to know the ethnic affiliation simply by seeing a person. This opposes a quite common essentialist argument describing Hutu as squat and Tutsi as tall and slender (Mamdani, 2001: 44; Watt, 2008: 26). However, interestingly, he underlined his constructivist reasoning by referring to a strong essentialist notion, namely that it is the ethnic affiliation of the ancestors and, hence, descent, that defines the ethnic affiliation. In the course of his statement he placed further emphasis on a constructivist perspective by stating that choice can also define ethnic affiliation. Hence, Julien holds constructivist and essentialist ideas about ethnicity and essentializes ethnicity while deconstructing it.

This article intends to demonstrate that essentialist and constructivist arguments are strongly intertwined in the reasoning of Rwandans and Burundians about ethnicity. For this purpose, two categories were developed from the interview material. The first category, *Essentializing Deconstructivism*, includes quotes in which the interviewees meant to deconstruct being Hutu and Tutsi and ethnicity in Rwanda and Burundi. In doing so, though, the interviewees strongly enhance essentialist notions of ethnicity in the way they relate ethnicity to descent, birth, and physical traits. The statements of the second category, *Deconstructing Essentialism*, also include constructivist and essentialist aspects. These lines of reasoning also refer to essentialist ideas, such as genes, descent, and blood as defining Hutu and Tutsi. However, in contrast to quotes included in the previous category, quotes in this category do not essentialize the ethnic categories themselves. Rather, interviewees clearly conceive of being Hutu and Tutsi as being *socially* constructed and, hence, as categories that are *at the moment* defined by these essentialist aspects.

How is ethnicity (to be) approached?

Like any other academic field, the debate about ethnicity underwent different attempts of categorization in the course of which the categories of essentialism (or primordialism⁶) as opposed to constructivism have been the most prominent ones. As Hale (2004: 459) puts it: “Analysts have typically lumped these richly diverse perspectives [*on ethnicity*, author’s note] into two supposedly opposing camps, usually dubbed ‘primordialism’ and ‘constructivism’.” Hale (2004) adds – and I agree – that this categorization has made the debate about ethnicity more confusing and even hinders the understanding of ethnicity.

Primordialists are assumed to conceive of ethnicity as blood-related and eternal, as having even genetic foundations (Harvey, 2000: 40). However, in fact, there are only very few authors contributing to the socio-scientific discussion who assert that ethnicity has a biological basis (Hale, 2004: 460). Even Van den Berghe who is often seen as the only “true” primordialist (Hale, 2004: 460; Hutchinson and Smith, 1996: 8) includes clearly social aspects such as preferential endogamy and inbreeding into his analysis (see Van den Berghe, 1981: 22). Regardless of the weak acceptance of essentialist approaches within the socio-scientific discussion, they

served and still serve as a starting point for lines of reasoning promoting a constructivist view on ethnicity (see Elwert, 2002; Hardin, 1995).

Unfortunately, some constructivist arguments do not go beyond the point of proving the essentialist concepts wrong and, hence, do not argue how ethnic categories (as opposed to other social categories) are to be defined (see Chazan et al., 1999; Elwert, 2002; Hardin, 1995; Mueller, 2000) – if not by descent, biology, and genes (Pieterse, 1996: 27). In doing so, some constructivist arguments conceived of in reaction to primordial ones “run the risk of throwing the baby out with the bathwater” as Karner (2007: 23) describes it. They simply neglect the very primordial aspect about ethnicity instead of integrating it to their constructivist arguments. Jenkins (2008: 173) gets to the heart of how some constructivist arguments fall short when he states, “although it [ethnicity, *author’s note*] is imagined it is not imaginary.”

Describing ethnicity as imagined goes back to Anderson’s (2003 [1983]) argument about “imagined communities.” Together with *The Invention of Tradition*, written and also first published in 1983 by Hobsbawm and Ranger, it is the most important point of reference within the early constructivist discussion about ethnicity and nation (see Conzen et al., 1992; Hanson, 1989; Spear, 2003; Van Schendel, 1992). Conceiving of categories as “imagined” or “invented” that previously had been understood in an essentialist manner, contributed decisively to the increased awareness of the world’s social constructedness (Sollors, 1989: x). However, in an implicit way (Sollors, 1989: xv), these lines of reasoning and their adoption enhance the perception that ethnicity and nationalism are somehow false, not real, and valid since they are “invented” (Calhoun, 1993: 222).^{7,8}

Although these lines of reasoning do not necessarily explicitly mention the concept “invention,” they reflect the idea implied in the concept. It points to the “power of the agent of invention” (Desai, 1993: 121) and neglects the historicity of ethnic categories and the complexity of the interpretative process (involving, e.g. also the social actors being subjects to these inventions) (Spear, 2003: 4).

In summary, some constructivist lines of reasoning still present in the current discussion about ethnicity (see also next section) avoid approaching ethnic categories and their potential (identity stabilizing) appeal analytically. In this sense, coming back to the starting point of this section, the mere “recurring argument about whether ethnic identities are essentially primordial or situational, [i.e. constructed, *author’s note*]” does not contribute positively to the attempts at conceptualizing ethnicity (Levine, 1999: 165).

Contradicting concepts of ethnic categories in Rwanda and Burundi

The limitation of an academic discussion, which is dominated by the struggle between essentialist and constructivist approaches, is particularly evident in the discussion about Rwanda and Burundi. The theoretical struggle and constructivist arguments that do not go beyond the point of proofing essentialist conceptualizations wrong hinder an appropriate understanding of ethnicity.

In Rwanda and Burundi, based on a population census conducted during colonial times (Lemarchand, 1994b: 6), Hutu are said to make up 85% of the population whereas 14% are thought to be Tutsi. The entire population in Rwanda and Burundi speaks one language and no major cultural differences exist between Hutu and Tutsi (Chrétien, 1997: 13; Lemarchand, 1994b: 588). It is widely acknowledged that the categories Hutu and Tutsi (and Twa) have not always had ethnic connotations (Buckley-Zistel 2006a: 101; Chrétien, 1997: 13; Kadende-Kaiser and Kaiser, 1997; Lemarchand, 1994a; Newbury, 2001; Young, 2006: 308). There is also a broad consensus that in the pre-colonial era, the categories were understood as fluid and flexible as well as being conceivable only in relation to each other (Eltringham, 2004: 14; Hintjens, 1999: 250; Kagame, 1954; Vansina, 1962). The major role of German and Belgian colonial powers in strengthening the ethnic categorization by allocating Rwandans and Burundians to the fixed categories of Hutu and Tutsi, which were then recorded in writing, is widely uncontested (Chrétien, 2000; Scherrer, 2002: 21; Young, 2006: 309). Several scholars also highlight that Hutu and Tutsi used to marry each other and still do so today (Scherrer, 2002: 18; Waters, 1995: 343). Generally speaking, social constructivist perspectives currently dominate the thinking about ethnicity in Rwanda and Burundi, emphasizing the socially constructed, fluid, and changeable character of the categories Hutu and Tutsi (Uvin, 1997: 93). Constructivist lines of reasoning about ethnicity in Rwanda and Burundi are enhanced among others by the lack of linguistic differences and of visibly distinct features as well as by common intermarriages in Rwanda and Burundi:

The literature pointing out that ethnic groups are a social construction has a particular salience in discussions of identity in both East and Central Africa. As numerous authors have noted, there are in fact few linguistic, phenotypical, or social differences between Hutu and Tutsi. Indeed, as all acknowledge, there has been substantial intermarriage, particularly in Rwanda. (Waters, 1995: 343)

Even more common is the argument that Hutu and Tutsi are not “ethnic groups” at all (see Chrétien and Prunier, 2003: V; Daley, 2006: 663; Hofmeier, 2005: 2; Scherrer, 2002: 26; Waters, 1995: 343), since as Scherrer (2002: 25) puts it, “the crucial determining criteria for an ethnic group are lacking.”

However, the lines of reasoning arguing either for a constructivist conception (exclusively in the Great Lakes) or for a conception of Hutu and Tutsi as non-ethnic categories are both based on essentialist criteria, such as language, physical appearance, and practised intermarriages. In both cases, Hutu and Tutsi are thought of as socially constructed categories, which are assumed to be different from other “ethnic groups” beyond the Rwandan and Burundian context or other socially relevant categories, such as clans. Since Hutu and Tutsi “do not conform to the ‘conventional’ definition” it is often stated that they “are not, *in reality*”, ethnic groups” (Eltringham, 2004: 5, emphasis added). Accordingly, ethnicity in Rwanda and Burundi appears to be less “real” than other ethnic categories

complying with these criteria in other contexts, and as “invented” and deniable: “If ethnicity [*in Rwanda*, author’s note] is an invention,” as Newbury and Newbury (1999: 294) describe this common way of reasoning, “then it can be abolished or ignored.”

In summary, neglecting essentialist notions about Hutu and Tutsi seems to be particularly tempting for lines of reasoning referring to the Rwandan and Burundian context since these categories cannot be distinguished by “typical ethnic markers,” such as language and physical appearance. However, in fact, neglecting the essentialist aspect of ethnicity is problematic not only for the discussion about Rwanda and Burundi. Constructivist lines of reasoning that over-emphasize the fluid and changeable character of ethnicity always fall short in explaining the high power that ethnic identities may carry for “potential ethnics”.

A more sophisticated conceptualization of ethnicity in Rwanda and Burundi, which has already been formulated by other authors (Buckley-Zistel, 2006a, 2006b, 2009; Eltringham, 2004; Kadende-Kaiser and Kaiser, 1997; Newbury, 1998; Nimubona, 2003), would contribute to a better understanding of ethnicity by integrating essentialist and constructivist perspectives.

Ethnic categories are social categories defined by descent

My study relies on an approach to ethnic categories, which is rooted in Weber’s (1978) definition of ethnicity first published in 1922. Defining “ethnic groups,” Weber (1978: 389) stresses the “subjective belief in [...] common descent” existing independently of “an objective blood relation.” This criterion is still seen to be crucial for defining ethnic categories and ethnicity (Bös, 2005: 322, 2008: 57; Jenkins, 2008: 10). Authors such as Bös (2005), Brubaker (2004), Fearon and Laitin (2000), Jenkins (2008), and Karner (2007) elaborate on this notion of ethnicity. Similarly, I conceive of ethnic categories as social categories that are defined by the *idea of* or the *belief in* common descent. This implies that the meaning of ethnic categories needs to be assessed by “potential ethnics” and not by outside observers based on “objective blood relations”, as Weber (1978) calls it. Rather, the belief in or the idea of common descent that “potential ethnics” have (or have not) is crucial. Therefore, I focus on how people “use and/or impose the prism of [...] ethnic identities in the things they say, the way they interpret and act in the world” (Karner, 2007: 11).

Fearon and Laitin (2000: 848) introduce the term “everyday primordialism” into the discussion about ethnicity. It refers to the beliefs “that certain categories are natural, inevitable, and unchanging facts about social life.” Of course, it does not imply that ethnic groups are “‘naturally occurring’ entities” (Karner, 2007: 17). Rather, “they reflect and rely upon social processes and discourses that *construct* and subsequently *naturalize/reify* group differences” (Karner, 2007: 17). The construction and reproduction of ethnic identities (including their primordial or constructivist explanation) depend on “social categorisation” as well as “group identification” – processes that are “inextricably interlinked” (Jenkins, 2008: 23).

Brubaker (2004) takes a similar approach to ethnicity but discusses more explicitly the role of the academic observer. He argues that an academic analysis should not ignore what he calls “common sense primordialism,” yet, it should neither simply replicate it (Brubaker, 2004: 9). Although the reification of ethnicity is to be avoided, it is crucial to base the analysis on “vernacular categories” and “participants’ understandings” (Brubaker, 2004: 10).

Having Brubaker’s (2004) argument in mind, I base my analysis on how “potential ethnics” (Waters, 1990: 13) conceive of ethnic categories. Based on conversations with young Rwandans, McLean Hilker (2009: 82) argues that “if we want to understand the on-going importance of these categories in Rwandan society and politics, we need to focus on how they are being (re)interpreted, utilized and experienced by Rwandans themselves.”⁹ Following this question, my analysis is focused on the essentialist and/or constructivist concepts Rwandans and Burundians have and on how they integrate the two different concepts in their lines of reasoning.

How are ethnic categories experienced?

During an 8-month stay from September 2007 to May 2008 in Rwanda and Burundi I conducted 42 interviews (20 in Burundi and 22 in Rwanda).¹⁰ I stayed for 4 months in each country. For the recruitment I relied on private contacts as well as on the institutional support of foreign organizations and official government structures.¹¹ For the selection of the interviewees, I followed a “selective sampling” approach (Kluge and Kelle, 1999). The resulting sample aims at representing the maximum variation of cases (Kluge and Kelle, 1999). The interviews conducted were semi-structured interviews that partly implied strong, theory-driven assumptions¹². The interviewees came from different regions (south, north, center, and the capitals)¹³, were Hutu or Tutsi, had different professions, were of different ages, lived in different socio-economic situations, and had different educational backgrounds.¹⁴ I spoke to more men than women, but some female interviewees are included into the sample.

Considering what has just been said in the previous section, I analyze how Rwandans and Burundians understand ethnicity and being Hutu and Tutsi. In this respect and against the backdrop of the theoretical discussion introduced above, three aspects are of special interest to me: (1) Strong essentialist notions of ethnicity exist. (2) Essentialist and constructivist notions appear next to each other. (3) Essentialist and constructivist notions do not simply exist next to each other, but they are strongly intertwined in the different ways of reasoning about ethnicity. In order to exemplify these complex and contradictory interpretations of ethnic categories I present two (out of many possible) categories that I developed on the basis of the interview material.¹⁵

The first category is called *Essentializing Deconstructivism*. It includes quotes in which the interviewees intend to *deconstruct* ethnicity in Rwanda and Burundi, by pointing to constructivist aspects such as politics, social, and political narrations.

However, they do this by *essentializing* ethnicity in the way they refer to physical traits, descent, etc., as the defining criteria for ethnicity. Hence, the statements included in the first category essentialize ethnic categories and replicate an essentialist understanding of these ethnic categories despite the intention to deconstruct them.

The statements of the second category, *Deconstructing Essentialism*, also include constructivist and essentialist aspects. Similar to the previous category, the quotes included in this category also refer to essentialist aspects of ethnicity, such as genes, descent, and blood, which are said to define being Hutu and Tutsi. However, in contrast to the previous category, interviewees do not essentialize the ethnic categories themselves. Rather, they clearly conceive of being Hutu and Tutsi as being *at the moment* defined by these essentialist aspects. These lines of reasoning imply that the categories of Hutu and Tutsi have not always been or will not necessarily always be defined like this. Thus far, the interviewees *deconstruct* the *essentializing* aspects of ethnicity. Hence, what sets this category, *Deconstructing Essentialism*, apart from the first one, *Essentializing Deconstructivism*, is that contradictory, that is, essentialist and constructivist, arguments are more easily integrated into a *consistent* (constructivist) understanding of ethnic categories.

Essentializing Deconstructivism

This section presents quotes from Rwandans and Burundians that illustrate particularly well the existence of strong essentialist notions, which prevail in the interviewees' arguments despite their attempts at deconstructing ethnicity.

This *essentializing deconstructivist* understanding is particularly strong in the first statement quoted here. The Burundian interviewee is a female deputy. Our conversation began with the question of what she understood under "ethnic group" and she immediately referred to physical traits and the possibilities to distinguish Hutu and Tutsi along physical traits:

It is difficult . . . it is difficult to find differences between . . . why one is called Hutu, why the others are called Tutsi. For me, honestly, when I see a person, it is difficult for me to tell: 'This is a Hutu' or 'This is a Tutsi!' They told us the Hutu are short. The Hutu have a nose that is flat. However, you can also find Tutsi who are shorter than the Hutu and who have noses which are flatter than those of the Hutu. But in general the Tutsi are tall – that is what they told us. [. . .] But if you meet somebody who you do not know, one might err [. . .]. (female deputy, Bujumbura)¹⁶

The interviewee expresses a constructivist tendency as she questions that being Hutu and Tutsi corresponds to a different physical appearance. However, when asked about her understanding of "ethnic groups" she quite self-evidently related the two categories to physical appearance. She refers to physical aspects such as a flat nose or the height of a person to depict the common understanding. Although she partly (but not fully) rejects this notion of ethnicity, she implicitly suggests that

there might be some truth about it. As she says, based on physical appearance, one might err about the correct ethnic affiliation, but generally speaking Tutsi are taller than Hutu. Consequently, she finds it remarkable that there are Tutsi who are shorter than Hutu. Apparently, she intends to deconstruct an essentialist notion of Hutu and Tutsi being commonly defined by physical differences. However, in doing so, she replicates this very essentialist notion.

Similar to the previous interviewee, the next also refers to physical appearance, and even behavior, in order to define Hutu and Tutsi. Nonetheless, according to his line of reasoning, Hutu and Tutsi are not ethnic categories since no differences regarding the culture, language, and habit exists in Rwanda. The interviewee is a Rwandan jurist. Our conversation began with the question of what he understood by ethnicity:

Interviewee: Ethnicity, I understand it as differences in language, culture and habit. That is why I am saying that normally in Rwanda there are no ethnies.

Author: How would you explain the cleavage between Hutu and Tutsi?

Interviewee: The cleavage between Hutu and Tutsi exists mainly at the level... I would say physic, even somehow at the level of behavior. I wanted to say psychological, but it is not really it... not that much... It is really at the level of behavior, like being introverted or extroverted, being brutal or... it exists, and it is even visible.

Author: So it is not possible to be Hutu without having parents who are Hutu?

Interviewee: It is not possible to be Hutu without having parents who are Hutu, yes.

Authors: And one cannot change the categories?

Interviewee: One cannot change the categories. That is what creates a lot of problems at the moment for those who are called 'Hutsi'. The Hutsi are a mix of the Hutu and the Tutsi... because one cannot change... leaving the ethnies Hutu, go to the ethnies Tutsi... that is what creates problems for the mixed, because they are rejected all over. (jurist, Kigali)¹⁷

His reasoning, referring to physical and even behavioral differences, promotes a strong essentialist notion of Hutu and Tutsi. He accentuated this essentialist picture when I asked him if it is possible to be Hutu without having parents who are Hutu. He simply denies this possibility without explaining why this is the case. An essentialist understanding is strongly revealed again when he describes Rwandans having Tutsi and Hutu parents (he refers to them as Hutsi who are rejected by both sides) as "mixed." The idea of "mixture" is based on a strong biological understanding: They have one Hutu parent and one Tutsi parent; therefore, they themselves are *composed of* Hutu and Tutsi. Arguing in this way, he conceives of being Hutu or Tutsi as something that is not socially ascribed but that is defined by blood or genes (or anything else that is biologically transmitted without being influenced by the social context). Hence, although he assumes it is wrong, due to the same culture, language and habitude, to speak about ethnic categories in Rwanda, he exhibits a clearly essentialist notion of Hutu and Tutsi.

The next interviewee argues in a similar way, referring to essentialist aspects of ethnicity in order to deconstruct essentialist notions. She points to mixed marriages and differences in physical appearance between Hutu and Tutsi. She is a Rwandan peasant woman, living in the outskirts of Kigali. At the beginning of our dialog, I asked her what she understood by ethnicity. She answered:

Interviewee: For a long time there had been a policy that said the Tutsi are the tall ones, with a beautiful face and who were rich. The Hutu was lazy, big and poor! [...] What I want to tell you is that in ten years there will be neither Hutu nor Tutsi in Rwanda because the mixed marriages are plenty at the moment.

Author: Is it possible to be Hutu without having parents who are Hutu?

Interviewee: If a Hutu woman gets married to a Tutsi and if their child is physically more alike to the family of the mother, he is Hutu, because he is physically more alike to the family of his mother. (peasant woman, outskirts of Kigali)¹⁸

The interviewee asserts that the categories of Hutu or Tutsi will disappear within the next 10 years, which points to a constructivist and non-essentialist understanding. She also understands ethnicity as not directly defined by descent and patrilineal rule. To my question concerning whether it is possible to be a Hutu without having Hutu parents, she argues in a way that emphasizes an aspect showing these categories as changeable and relatively less strictly defined. At the same time, however, she refers to the physical appearance of the child in order to define its affiliation to Hutu and Tutsi: if the child looks like the family of the Hutu mother, he is Hutu even though the father might be Tutsi. Equally promoting an essentialist understanding by assuming that descent and/or blood are decisive for ethnic affiliation, she reasons that the frequent intermarriages between Hutu and Tutsi are the cause for the disappearance of Hutu and Tutsi. The interviewee intends to describe Hutu and Tutsi as categories that are changeable over time and able to be ignored for the moment. But, in doing so, she promotes an essentialist understanding of them.

In summary, quotes presented in this category replicate a strong essentialist understanding of ethnicity. As all interviewees refer to physical appearance, descent and intermarriages to sustain arguments that are meant to challenge the essentialist definition of Hutu and Tutsi, they essentialize these categories – despite intending to deconstruct them.

Deconstructing Essentialism

The Rwandan and Burundian interviewees, whose statements are included in the category *Deconstructing Essentialism*, share my understanding (and that of many well-known authors, Bös, 2005; Brubaker, 2004; Fearon and Laitin, 2000; Jenkins, 2008; Karner, 2007) of ethnic categories. Ethnic categories are understood as socially constructed and socially changeable categories – but as categories that are real, because Rwandans and Burundians understand them as real (see the “Ethnic categories are social categories defined by descent” section).

Nonetheless, some of the statements replicate an essentialist image of ethnicity in general (i.e. referring to contexts beyond Rwanda and Burundi) or of other socially relevant categories, such as clans. Ethnicity (only) in Rwanda and Burundi appears to be artificial and ignorable.

The first statement of a Rwandan teacher illustrates an interpretation of Hutu and Tutsi, which assumes that these categories are socially constructed, but nonetheless real. I asked him about the most important cleavages in present Rwanda, and he replied:

Actually, there are ethnic cleavages. Boah, within quotation marks because what we call ethnic, it is not ethnique, ethnique. [...] The cleavage is at the level of the period that I just described: of '59. Because, actually, this was the moment in which the cleavage started to become apparent. The cleavage was always motivated by differences, at the beginning economic differences, but pushed by the colonizers. They wanted to exploit these differences, exactly in order to achieve their interests. (teacher, Kigali)¹⁹

According to the teacher, the social cleavage between Hutu and Tutsi is the most important cleavage in Rwanda. In this respect, he identifies 1959 as a crucial point in time, because this was when the ethnic cleavage became apparent for the first time.²⁰ Yet, the cleavage had always been fueled by economic differences and pushed by the colonial powers that exploited the social difference. In this sense, the interviewee describes the categories of Hutu and Tutsi as being socially constructed, yet real. At the same time, he describes ethnic categories in Rwanda and Burundi as not *really* real; but rather as ethnic within quotation marks to distinguish them from the real “ethnies” (that he calls “ethnies ethniques”). Thus, he essentializes the notion of ethnicity in other contexts beyond Rwanda where ethnic categories *do exist*.

The next interviewee, a Burundian, juxtaposes clan affiliation to the categories of Hutu and Tutsi. In doing so, he assumes clan affiliation to be more real (in terms of an “anthropological reality”) than ethnic affiliation. He is *mushingantahe*, a traditional mediating authority in Burundi. In the following statement, in which he answered my question about what he understood by ethnicity or an “ethnic group,” he emphasized the powerful realness of “ethnies” in Burundi:

Is it possible to deny the real existence of ethnies today? I think after these cycles of violence that we went through; the Burundians have already interiorized their ethnic affiliation since they have been victims of these very cleavages. Hence, just simply taking into account how they have been victims of their ethnic affiliation, it would be difficult to affirm today that the people do not have the consciousness of belonging to an ethnique. [...] Thus, it is not an anthropological reality, our anthropological reality are foremost the clans, but we have the ethnies as a strategy for instrumentalization of the different social components of Burundi in order to stay in power. But the ethnic consciousness starts to get implanted after these cyclic crises that we have lived through. (*mushingantahe*, Bujumbura)²¹

According to his statement, the *reality* of ethnic categories in Burundi cannot be denied. Due to the violent and cyclic crises, ethnic affiliation is part of the consciousness of Burundians. The interviewee juxtaposes the reality of the ethnic categories to the reality of the clan membership that is, as he puts it, an anthropological reality. By describing clan membership as anthropological reality, that is, as part of being human, he essentializes it and deconstructs the ethnic reality.

Another mushingantahe implicitly describes Hutu and Tutsi as a reality in Burundi. He also asserts that the clans, however, existed before. Only as the result of an instrumentalization by the colonial powers, the clan members were regrouped as Hutu and Tutsi. When I asked him if it is possible to be Hutu or Tutsi without having parents who are Hutu or Tutsi, he answered:

No, it is impossible because due to instrumentalization a way of categorization emerged that regroupes the clans into big categories called Hutu and Tutsi [...]. There are clans that are labeled as such and they have to be perceived as being composed of Hutu and Tutsi. (mushingantahe, Bujumbura)²²

He clearly denies the possibility of being Hutu or Tutsi without having parents of the same ethnic affiliation. Thus, he acknowledges a concept of ethnicity that is based on descent. Yet, he sees this concept as induced by an instrumentalization that regrouped—as he says—already existing clan memberships into “ethnic groups.” Hence, he describes being Hutu or Tutsi as an essentialistically defined (i.e. defined by descent) category that is socially constructed.

In summary, all statements included in this category acknowledge ethnic categories as constructed *reality*. However, the interviewees do not imply that this reality exists and persists independently of the social context.

Essentialist and constructivist notions of ethnicity

The findings of this analysis are highly relevant both for the theoretical conceptualization of ethnicity in general, as well as for the discussion about ethnicity in Rwanda and Burundi. My analysis confirms the findings by Newbury (1998: 83) who says that in Rwanda as elsewhere, “ethnic identities are not rigid, unchanging, or universal categories. But neither are they entirely ephemeral, fluid, and individual.” This is true, as I argue, because Rwandans and Burundians themselves (not any outside observer) conceive of ethnicity and of being Hutu and Tutsi in this way. Following the theoretical approach of Bös (2005), Brubaker (2004), Fearon and Laitin (2000), Karner (2007), and Jenkins (2008) and the empirical approach of Gil-White (1999) and Waters (1990: 13), who ask for the implicit conceptions of “potential ethnics,” ethnicity in Rwanda and Burundi can be described as: constructed and essentialist, and, consequently: as fluid and changeable on the one hand, and rigid and unchanging, on the other hand.

Some of the interviewees see the production and persistence of ethnic categories (i.e. Hutu and Tutsi) to be influenced by the social context, or more precisely by

political and economic instrumentalization, social and political narration and recurrent violent crises. Also the aspect of individual choice is revealed and inconsistencies related to categorization are emphasized within the different statements. On this basis, the essentialist reality of ethnic categories is challenged. Other lines of reasoning, however, attempt to challenge the essentialist reality of Hutu and Tutsi by referring to arguments that themselves have a strong essentialist notion, such as physical traits (that do not correspond to their ethnic bearer) and intermarriage, or by contrasting ethnic affiliation with clan membership, which is either more real than ethnic affiliation or contradictory to ethnic affiliation (regarding the assumed ancestry). Hence, the analysis of the notions of Rwandans and Burundians shows that essentialist and constructivist understandings of ethnicity (and other socially relevant categories) are strongly intertwined and that ethnicity is essentialized while being deconstructed – and deconstructed while being essentialized.

Moreover, the analysis clearly contradicts the argument that there are no ethnic categories, as it is often stated in respect to Rwanda and Burundi (Chrétien and Prunier, 2003: V; Daley, 2006: 663; Scherrer, 2002: 26; Waters, 1995: 343). Approaching ethnic categories based on how “potential ethnics” (Waters, 1990; see also Brubaker, 2004; Gil-White, 1999; Karner, 2007) conceive of ethnic categories reveals the relevance of taking essentialist notions into account. It is not sufficient to simply avoid ethnic categories by arguing that ethnic categories – in general as well as in Rwanda and Burundi – are not adequately described in essentialist terms or do not correspond to essentialist markers (see Chazan et al., 1999; Elwert, 2002; Hardin, 1995; Mueller, 2000). This indisputably correct observation falls too short. When asked if it is possible to be Hutu without having Hutu parents, almost all of my interviewees denied this possibility. Undoubtedly, in Rwanda and Burundi, the categories of Hutu and Tutsi are strongly related to the notion of descent and related aspects such as physical appearance, ancestors, and biology. Therefore, analytical concepts that fail to take these essentialist notions into account cannot capture the ethnic reality of “potential ethnics” in Rwanda and Burundi.

In conclusion, the analysis clearly shows the importance of investigating how “potential ethnics” conceive of their world and, hence, how they conceive of ethnic categories: first, because, ethnic categories are not at all negligible analytical categories (Jenkins, 2008: 173; Karner, 2007: 23; Levine, 1999: 165; Pieterse, 1996: 27); and second, because using this analytical category reveals contradictory and very complex ethnic realities. Therefore, it is crucial to overcome the ostensible antagonism of “essentialism” versus “social-constructivism” and to promote an analytical concept of ethnicity that allows capturing essentialist notions of ethnicity, which are an empirical reality, not only in Rwanda and Burundi but also in other countries.

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Notes

1. The article is based on thoughts that I developed and interviews that I conducted within the scope of a larger project. The project is mainly concerned with the notions that Rwandans and Burundians have of ethnicity, of the relationship between politics and ethnicity, and of social and political exclusion based on ethnicity (Schraml, 2012).
2. Original text in French: “Mais encore une fois: personne ne sait qui est Hutu qui est Tutsi en vrai, en réalité. Personne ne connaît son arrière-grand-père alors personne ne le sait. Mais parfois même dans certaines familles tu peux voir un frère qui est Hutu, l’autre frère est Tutsi. Même père, même mère, ils ont fait un choix.”
3. Besides Hutu and Tutsi, Twa are said to make up 1% of the population in both countries (Lemarchand, 1994b: 6). Since Twa do not act collectively within the political conflicts in the two countries, they also have a less prominent role within the discussion about ethnicity in Rwanda and Burundi (Mamdani, 2001: 44). That is the reason that I did not include the notions of Twa. For practical reasons, I will nonetheless speak about Rwandans and Burundians – while referring only to Hutu and Tutsi – throughout the article.
4. Gil-White (1999: 795) asks Torguud nomadic pastoralists in Western Mongolia among others the question: “If the father is Kazakh and the mother Mongol, what is the ethnicity of the child?” I adopt the question by asking my interviewees whether it is possible to be Hutu (Tutsi) without having parents who are Hutu (Tutsi).
5. Rwanda and Burundi have, and have had in the past, very different political systems and opposing political ways in dealing with ethnicity. Elsewhere (Schraml, 2010, 2012) and also based on these interviews, I analyzed the relationship between the different political systems and opposing ways of dealing with ethnicity in Rwanda and Burundi, on the one hand, and conflict-prone interpretations of social inequalities (referring to ethnic categories), on the other hand.
6. I use the two terms synonymously, as do most of the authors contributing to the debate.
7. For instance, Gellner (1965: 169, emphasis added) speaks about nations that are “invented” “where they do not *exist*.” In doing so, he suggests that “invention” should be understood to be the same as “fabrication” and “falsity” (Anderson, 2003). In subsequent analyses, Ranger himself (1994: 25) acknowledges the implications of the overemphasis of “invention”: “I have been changing my mind away from the notion of ‘invention’ and towards the notion of ‘imaginings’. I like the word ‘imagining’ because it lays stress upon ideas and images and symbols.”
8. Hobsbawm’s, Ranger’s, and Anderson’s arguments are much more focused on nationalism and nation, but the discussion about ethnicity has been strongly influenced by them.
9. Unlike McLean Hilker (2009) though, in the present article, I do not analyze the relationship between the political system in Rwanda and Burundi and the concepts of

- ethnicity, but I look at the constructivist and primordial notions Rwandans and Burundians have.
10. The interviews were conducted mainly in French and roughly translated to English for this article.
 11. For the interviews I conducted with Rwandan prisoners in the Central Prison in Kigali (not quoted here in the article), I needed a permission from the prison authorities.
 12. For example the question: Is it possible to be Hutu without having parents who are Hutu? See also the quotes below.
 13. I conducted interviews with Rwandans in Kigali, Butare, Nyanza, Bugesera, and Gisenyi and with Burundians in Bujumbura, Bururi, Ngozi, and Gitega.
 14. In order to know the ethnic affiliation of my interviewees I had to rely on what they or people surrounding them told me (I never asked directly in the interviews). Since I do not aim at discussing their perspective (being either more essentialists or more constructivists) on ethnicity in relation to their ethnic identification, I do not describe my interviewees in this respect. Mentioning their profession serves to distinguish them. For arguments relating ethnic affiliation to constructivist or essentialist lines of reasoning, see Mamdani (2002: 499) and Uvin (2001: 76).
 15. Based on the interview material, I developed 40 categories, some of which identify ethnicity.
 16. Original text in French: “C’est difficile en tout cas, c’est difficile de trouver les différences entre...pourquoi on est appelé Hutu pourquoi les autres sont appelés Tutsi? Moi, franchement, lorsque je vois une personne il m’est difficile de dire: ‘C’est un Hutu’ ou ‘C’est un Tutsi’. On nous a dit les Hutu sont de petite taille. Les Hutu ont un nez qui est épaté. Mais vous pouvez aussi trouver des Tutsi qui sont de plus petite taille que d’ailleurs les Hutu et qui ont des nez plus épatés que ceux des Hutu. Mais en général les Tutsi sont de grande taille – ce qu’on nous a dit.[...] Mais si vous rencontrez quelqu’un que vous ne connaissez pas il y a lieu pour se tromper [...]”
 17. Original text in French:

Interviewee: Ethnicité, je comprends, je comprends ça comme différences de langue, culture et habitude. C’est ce qui me fait dire qu’au Rwanda normalement ce ne sont pas d’ethnies. [...]

Author: Comment vous expliqueriez le clivage entre Hutu et Tutsi?

Interviewee: Le clivage entre Tutsi et Hutu ça existe surtout au niveau... je dirais physique, même quelque part au niveau du comportement. J’allais dire psychologique, mais pas vraiment... tellement... c’est vraiment au niveau de comportement comme être introverti ou extroverti, être brutal ou... ça existe et c’est visible même.

Author: Alors ce n’est pas possible d’être Hutu sans avoir des parents Hutu?

Interviewee: C’est pas possible d’être Hutu sans avoir des parents Hutu, oui.

Author: Et on ne peut pas changer les catégories?

Interviewee: On ne peut pas changer les catégories, c’est ça qui crée pour le moment les problèmes pour ceux qui sont appelés ‘les Hutu’. Les Hutu c’est le mélange, c’est le mélange entre les Hutu et les Tutsi. Du fait qu’on ne peut pas changer... quitter l’ethnie Hutu aller dans l’ethnie Tutsi... ce qui crée des problèmes pour les mélanges parce qu’ils sont refusés partout.”

18. Original text in French:

Interviewee: Depuis longtemps, il y a eu une politique qui disait que les Tutsi sont des gens de longue taille, avec un beau visage et qui étaient riches! Le Hutu était laid, gros et pauvre! [...] Ce que je veux te dire c'est que dans 10 ans il n'y aura ni Hutu ni Tutsi au Rwanda parce que les mariages mixtes sont nombreux actuellement! [...]

Author: Est-ce que c'est possible d'être Hutu sans avoir des parents Hutu?

Interviewee: Si une femme Hutu se marie à un Tutsi, et que leur enfant ressemble beaucoup plus à la famille de sa mère, il est Hutu parce qu'il ressemble à la famille de sa mère."

19. Original text in French: "En fait, ce sont les clivages ethniques. Boah, entre guillemet parce que ce qu'on appelle ethnique, ce n'est pas l'ethnie, ethnique. [...]... le clivage se trouve au niveau de la période que moi j'ai décrit: de '59. Parce que c'est en fait le début de l'extériorisation de ce clivage. Le clivage était toujours motivé par des différences, d'abord des différences économiques, mais poussé par les colonisateurs. Ils voulaient exploiter ces différences, justement pour les mettre en profit de leur intérêt."
20. When the colonial powers withdraw, a political movement aiming to emancipate the socially and politically discriminated Hutu took over power. Tutsi who have been said to have benefited from the social and political structures persistent under colonial rule became the target of massacres and persecution.
21. Original text in French: "Aujourd'hui est-ce qu'on peut nier l'existence réelle des ethnies? Je pense après ces violences cycliques que nous avons traversées, les Burundais ont déjà intériorisé leur appartenance ethnique pour avoir été victimes justement de ces clivages. Il serait donc difficile aujourd'hui d'affirmer que les gens n'ont pas cette conscience d'appartenir à une ethnique sur la simple considération de la manière dont ils en étaient des victimes. [...] donc, ce n'est pas du tout une réalité anthropologique, notre réalité anthropologique est surtout clanique, mais nous avons les ethnies comme une stratégie de l'instrumentalisation des composantes sociales du Burundi en défendant... de se maintenir au pouvoir. Mais la conscience ethnique commence à s'implanter après ces crises cycliques que nous venons de vivre."
22. Original text in French: "Non, c'est impossible parce qu'avec l'instrumentalisation il y avait une catégorisation sociale qui consiste à regrouper les clans dans des grands ensembles qualifiés d'être Hutu ou Tutsi [...]. Il y a des clans qui ont des dénominations et qui doivent être perçus comme étant composés des Hutu et des Tutsi."

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