

***Le totem des Baranda* ('The Baranda's totem'): Fragments of the history of Hutu-Tutsi inter-caste conflicts¹**

Thoughts on how to destroy barriers between castes

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*En Afrique des Grands Lacs, la mort est partout, triomphante, arrogante.
Mais ne l'était-elle pas déjà du temps de Karanda qui fut grand à cause de
sa vision d'aigle ?* (Mbonimpa 2001, 309)²

1. Introduction

Although taken from a work of fiction, the epigraphic quotation above refers to real events: the slaughter in Great Lakes Africa in 2001, the same year Melchior Mbonimpa's novel was published. The countries in that region, mainly Burundi, Rwanda, Uganda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo were all victims of atrocities that arose from the pitting of Hutu against Tutsi in Rwanda in the 1990s. All four countries, as well as Tanzania and Kenya, were deeply affected by the Tutsi genocide and the massacre of Hutus, which occurred in 1994. The Democratic Republic of the Congo, especially, had found itself invaded by more than two million refugees in only a few days, among whom were hidden Hutu soldiers and militiamen who had committed genocidal acts against the Tutsi and had massacred Hutus as well. For a dozen years after the horrors of 1994, the Democratic Republic of the Congo regularly suffered attacks by the soldiers of the RPF (Rwandan Patriotic Front, a mostly Tutsi army), who claimed they had to

¹ This article is roughly based on the author's 2020 monograph, *Exil et errance dans les littératures francophones : miroir du quotidien ?* ('Exile and wandering in French literature: a mirror of everyday life?'), which also dedicates a chapter to Melchior Mbonimpa's novel, *Le totem des Baranda* ('The Baranda's totem') (Sinanga-Ohlmann 2020, 95-126). The author thanks Dr. Basil Kingstone, former editor-in-chief of the *Canadian Journal of Netherlandic Studies*, for the English translations.

² In Great Lakes Africa, death is everywhere, triumphant, arrogant. But was it not so already in the days of Karanda, who was great because of his eagle vision?

invade to 'take out' the Hutu militias who had been involved in the genocide. This went on until 2007, when Rwanda signed peace agreements with the Democratic Republic of the Congo on condition that the DR Congo hand over to the Rwandan government all those who had participated in the genocide. Before this agreement, many innocent Congolese and Rwandans had been victims of the violence between the various military or rebel factions of the two countries.³

But even before the 1990s, Great Lakes Africa had not exactly been a haven of peace. How long have these conflicts been destabilizing Great Lakes Africa? The quotation with which I began offers an answer to the question as it suggests that Karanda, the ancestor of the clan in the novel, lived long before colonial times.⁴ Hence, it seems that this history of violence may not only be due to colonization, as argued by a number of writers, most notably Josias Semujanga in his work *Origins of Rwandan genocide* (2003), Fr. Herménégilde Twagirimukiza in *Pourquoi mon exil, Seigneur?* ('Why am I exiled, my Lord?') (1994) and, more recently, Isaïe Murashi in *Sur les origines du génocide contre les Tutsis. Livre I. La fausse théorie de peuplement initial du Rwanda* ('On the origins of the genocide against the Tutsis. Book I. The false theory of the initial settlement of Rwanda') (2019).⁵ In his work *Origins of Rwandan genocide*, Semujanga (2003) refers to researchers such as Dominique Franche and Ferdinand Nahimana who call into question pre-colonial Rwanda's national unity. He argues against their point of view as follows:

In addition, contrary to what Franche says about the myth of Gihanga (that it may not be shared by the whole population), every Rwandan knows this founding myth of the kingdom. It is in fact very ancient, like the cultural unity of the country, which is acknowledged by the author. What is cultural unity of the country, if not sharing of the same beliefs and the same myths? Franche suspects the White Fathers of having transformed national cultures through 'the teaching of mission', and he is quite right to do so, but when he denies the existence of shared popular beliefs like myths of foundation, he goes too far and cannot produce material justifications. For example, in

³ In 2013, Robin Philpot characterized these conflicts as the "new scramble for Africa" in his book titled *Rwanda and the new scramble for Africa. From tragedy to useful imperial fiction*.

⁴ Germany colonized Rwanda in 1897 as part of German East Africa, while Belgium took control during World War I. Rwanda gained independence from Belgium in 1962, when the country was separated from neighbouring Burundi.

⁵ As one can read in Peter Uvin's *Aiding violence* (1998, 36-37): "Racist prejudice in Rwanda fed on more than a century of myths and images of inferiority and superiority that predated colonization but were greatly strengthened and modified during the colonial period. At the time of independence, the power positions were inverted, but not the images. Hence, the social acceptability of racist prejudice was based on its deeply ingrained nature in Rwanda's social and political history; it became strengthened with every occurrence of violence in neighboring Burundi and at home."

order to deny the country's national unity, the author repeats arguments that were already put forth by historians like Ferdinand Nahimana, according to whom national unity in Rwanda is a myth that was invented by colonization: 'From the general use of Rwandan language and from a majority of cultural features throughout present-day Rwanda and a little beyond, it is often deducted that Rwanda was a 'nation' in 1900.

(Semujanga 2003, 106-107)

I find Semujanga's argument to be problematic because there is undoubtably inequality within the founding myths of the Rwandan people – the Hutu, Tutsi and Twa – and where there is inequality amongst a group of people, there usually is an issue surrounding unity. Let us recall the Rwandan founding myths that he argues are a symbol of cultural unity.

The two Rwandan founding myths are, as re-counted by Carney (2014):

Growing out of oral traditions associated with the royal court, two Banyarwanda myths explained the origins of Hutu, Tutsi, and Twa. In the first, Kigwa, son of heavenly king Nkuba and first earthly king of Rwanda, had three sons – Gatutsi, Gahutu, and Gatwa. All three of his sons were deprived of a social faculty. The first son, Gatutsi, suggested that they petition Imana, the high god of traditional Rwanda religion, for new faculties. Imana subsequently bestowed Gatutsi with the high quality of anger, Gahutu with the qualities of disobedience and labor, and Gatwa with the quality of gluttony. The second myth relates how Kigwa tested his three sons by entrusting each of them with a calabash of milk. The next morning, Gatwa had drunk his milk, Gahutu had spilled his milk, and Gatutsi had preserved his calabash of milk. For his courage and obedience, Kigwa rewarded Gatutsi with command over the 'gluttonous serf' Gatwa and the 'clumsy peasant' Gahutu.

(Carney 2014, 10-11)

Carney (2014) commenting on these myths adds:

While Bernardin Muzungu is correct to note that these traditional myths never posited different geographical or racial origins for Hutu, Tutsi and Twa, Muzungu fails to note the inherent moral hierarchy implicit in these origin myths. Both stories reinforced traditional ethnic stereotypes while lending an air of divine sanction to Rwanda's traditional social hierarchy, problematizing Muzungu's romanticist claims that 'all the millennial history of co-existence between the two groups [Hutu and Tutsi] had been characterized by flawless harmony.' One should note, however, that the Hutu-Tutsi-Twa division was not the sole or even preeminent concern of nineteenth-century origin myths; clan alliances, religious power, and warrior narratives appeared even more frequently.

(Carney 2014, 11)

Not only does Semujanga (2003) use the two origin myths to assert that there was unity between Tutsi, Hutu and Twa, but he bases this assertion furthermore on the word '*imfura*' which is used to refer to "(the first born of any caste) who brings together wisdom, goodness, and courage" (Semujanga 2003, 126). '*Imfura*', however, is also used to refer to the Tutsi people, a usage which circles back to the origin myth in which the Tutsi are given the quality of wisdom and courage on top of being "appointed chief" (Semujanga 2003, 87) of the other two ethnic groups. Consequently, the argument that the founding myths of Rwanda or the attribution of the word '*imfura*' are symbolic of the unity between Hutu, Tutsi and Twa appears to be rather problematic. Indeed, it can hardly be suggested that they confirm a "flawless harmony" (Semujanga 2003, 106) and peaceful coexistence between Hutu, Tutsi and Twa in precolonial Rwanda.

Specialists of the African Great Lakes region which includes Rwanda and Burundi have shown that the region has a long history of violence.⁶ Long before the arrival of the German and Belgian colonists, there were conquest wars, revolts, civil wars, and massacres. And before 1994, there was even another genocide, that of the Hutu in Burundi in 1972 (Kiraranganya 1985; Lemarchand 2004). So, what are the causes of this age-old antagonism between the Hutu and the Tutsi in Rwanda and Burundi? How have relations between the two groups evolved from pre-colonial times to the 21st century? These are some of the questions to which *Le totem des Baranda* ('The Baranda's totem') (Mbonimpa 2001) offers partial answers.

The novel is of course a work of fiction, but several facts narrated therein seem modelled on those recorded in the historiography of countries in Great Lakes Africa, including Rwanda and Burundi. The novel is chiefly set in Burundi, but Melchior Mbonimpa (1993, 13) has said that "the fate of this country and its northern neighbour are so intertwined that to speak of one is to speak of the other."⁷ There is little mention of the Twa, also referred to as pariahs, in the novel. Not only are the Twa barely mentioned, but conflicts that have pitted Hutu against Tutsi or vice versa did not occur between the Twa and Hutu or Twa and Tutsi. It

⁶ Uvin (1998, 15) writes: "Originally, the interlacustrine region consisted of a number of small kingdoms that were often at war with one another. Historians have documented how one of the central kingdoms, the Nyiginya kingdom, slowly expanded, eventually controlling a territory that basically coincided with Rwanda's current one (in contrast to most other African countries, whose borders are often colonial fabrication)."

⁷ The same argument can be found in Uvin (1998, 220-221): "In the case of Rwanda, there is an important twist to 'the violence begets violence' argument: namely, the dynamics between Rwanda and Burundi. Indeed, the destructive, mirrorlike situation of these two countries is unique and has dramatic effects. Both countries represent each other's worst fears, and events in one country are interpreted and used by its (radical) neighbors to confirm their worst suspicions and fears."

should be noted that both Hutu and Tutsi hold the Twa in low esteem, even up to this day.

Apart from novels written under the patronage of Fest' Africa in 1998,⁸ few literary works have portrayed the Hutu-Tutsi conflicts and explained their historical roots. Many eye-witness accounts have been published, but very few novels. For that reason, *Le totem des Baranda* ('The Baranda's totem') is particularly interesting, since its historical content is obvious, and my article illustrates the parallels between this work and some non-literary ones. Before the presentation of the content of *Le totem des Baranda* ('The Baranda's totem'), a brief introduction of the three groups is important. I should stress that there is no consensus on what word to use to identify the groups sociologically. Some have designated them as ethnic groups, others as castes or social classes. For many reasons laid out and well explained by Semujanga (2003, 101-109), neither of those terms qualify to represent these three groups. In this article, they will be referred to according to their 'historical' professions: pastoralists (Tutsi), agriculturalists (Hutu) and potters (Twa). Given that pastoralists (the Tutsi) constitute the dominant group, it is important to define what is meant by the term. This will help my readers understand some of the points discussed in my analysis of *Le totem des Baranda* ('The Baranda's totem').

Pastoralism is a sophisticated, historically ancient subsistence strategy that long pre-dates agriculture. It is, and was, found in regions of the globe that are not easily conducive to agriculture. Characteristics of pastoralism include:⁹

Pastoralists are, contrary to what is often believed, not nomads. If necessary, they practice transhumance: the action of moving their herd animals in a seasonal cycle, usually twice a year: highlands in summer, lowlands in winter. In Africa, transhumance is and was not always necessary. Pastoralists also erect significant centres – from kraals to cities.

Pastoralists share a horror of agriculture. The act of digging into the earth is seen as a desecration of mother earth (although they are not averse to raiding for agricultural products).

⁸ In 1998, the Chadian poet Nocky Djedanoum, who organized each year the Lille based festival of African literature and culture, launched the Fest' Africa Project: "Rwanda: Writing with a duty to remember." Djedanoum went to Kigali with a group of nine African writers for a two-month period of residence to reflect and write about the Tutsi Genocide of 1994. Presented as commemorative works, the pieces were written mostly by African writers who were not Rwandese and who did not experience directly the genocide (Brezault 2016).

⁹ I gratefully acknowledge the anonymous reviewer who provided the detailed information about pastoralism included in this article.

Pastoralists share a fierce independence, practice eye for an eye justice, are patrilineal, often patrilocal, and patriarchal. As such, they prize strength, ability to fight, raiding, war, etc. Women are powerful in their own sphere, but there are strict gender roles, including gender-based division of labour.

Pastoralists scorn agriculturalists as people tied to/beholden to, and often defilers of, land.

The most common pastoral political organization is the Chieftdom. A Chieftdom is a regional political organization in which two or more local groups are organized under a single ruling individual – the Chief – who is at the head of a ranked hierarchy of people.

- *The office of Chief is hereditary, usually father to son.*
- *The Chief is a true authority figure – his authority unites his people in all affairs at all times.*
- *Within a Chieftdom one finds a hierarchy of authority: major and minor figures that control major and minor subdivisions of the Chieftdom – there is a chain of command, and leaders are linked at every level. This system binds groups in the heartland and hinterland to the Chief's headquarters. This certainly appears to hold for the Tutsi political organization.*
- *The Chief controls the economic activities of his people.*
- *The Chief usually has control of the labour force.*
- *The Chief may demand quotas from specialized farmers.*
- *The Chief distributes land amongst people – be this conquered land or occupied.*
- *The Chief has the power to recruit/coerce members of his society into military service.*
- *The Chief can recruit/conscript labour to build palaces, temples, irrigation works, etc.*

For pastoralists, pastoralism is the central principle of their identity. Their herd animals are their wealth.

Pastoralists practice bride-wealth (bride price): payment made by a groom or his kin to the kin of the bride in order to ratify a marriage. Divorce is possible, but a marriage is not ended until the return of bride-wealth has been acknowledged. The payment of bride-wealth is most often a matter of social and symbolic as well as economic reciprocity.

We will see that most of what is said about the pastoralists in this description is similar to how Melchior Mbonimpa presents them in his novel *Le totem des Baranda* ('The Baranda's totem').

2. Le totem des Baranda ('The Baranda's totem')

The novel is composed of a series of stories told by members of the same clan in different generations, all of whom are descended from the founding ancestor Karanda (the clan's name Baranda means 'descended from Karanda'). At least four centuries separate the ancestor from Maya Niki, the last descendant, whose story ends in the year 2125.

The first chapter serves as a prologue. Maya Niki, the narrator who speaks for the other characters, presents the genesis of the novel. The second and third chapters, entitled *Le testament de Karanda* ('Karanda's will') and *Les vaches ou la mort* ('Cows or death'), make up the first part of the history which unfolds linearly. The narrators of these two chapters tell of the pre-colonial period, a time when pastoralists, agriculturists and potters were still discovering each other and in which their destinies became intertwined. Not much is said about the potters in this novel. The story focuses instead on the clashes between Hutu and Tutsi, i.e., between agriculturalists and pastoralists.

The fourth chapter, *Les noces délinquantes* ('Delinquent marriages'), introduces the first mixed marriages between Hutus and Tutsis, and the arrival of the colonizers from Belgium, whom the narrator calls a fourth caste. Here the novel presents a society undergoing change, of which these intermarriages are the first sign. They are not blessed by the families of the couple, who feel them to be wrong and regard them as 'delinquent'.

From the fifth to the ninth chapter, the reader essentially discovers the various conflicts which pit the Hutus against the Tutsis, and the colonizers against the local peoples. In these chapters solutions are also suggested and the author through the narrator pleads for fairness and justice for all.

2.1 *Karanda's will or Hutu-Tutsi relations before colonization*

Karanda is a young orphan who must flee his native region because all his family had been decimated by epidemics, arrows, poison and sacrifice (Mbonimpa 2001, 44-45). His exact origins are not revealed, but many hints allow us to place both his origins and the rest of his life in Burundi or Rwanda. For example, we read that the people of the country where Karanda takes refuge consist of three castes: the agriculturists (Hutu) or serfs, the pastoralists (Tutsi), and the pygmies (the Twa) who are potters/hunters. The serfs, we read, work for the pastoralists, who are the rulers. Kagoma, the man who takes Karanda in, is of the serf caste and thus the young refugee becomes a cowherd for the pastoralist for whom his benefactor works. Kagoma considers Karanda to be the son he never had and decides to marry him to his daughter Gahimbare, so as to keep him in the family. Karanda must remain in his father-in-law/adoptive father's service so that he can take care

of his family and perhaps, one day, acquire some cows of his own through service to a pastoralist cow owner. He does this reluctantly, for in his heart he nurtures the idea of independence. He refuses to let his descendants be condemned to the same fate and so he makes a will which forbids all his sons to own cows because a serf can only acquire cows by becoming the servant of a pastoralist. Instead, he orders them to scatter and find land not belonging to anyone, settle on it and start a new life as free men. Apparently, when a serf father dies, his son must take his place in his master's service, which is why Karanda orders his sons to go where nobody can find them. Legends like that of Ndabaga bear witness to this custom of inherited servitude.¹⁰ When Karanda dies, his sons obey his will. They leave their property and scatter as he bids them to do.

His wife Gahimbare, however, does not do as he wished; she does not have to, being the Inabaranda, the matriarch of the Baranda. Before killing herself, she tells her eldest and favorite son Bitama with whom she decided to go in exile to find one of his brothers and have him go and find another brother, and so on until all five are found. She wants her sons, despite the orders in their father's will, to re-forge the links of brotherhood. Hers is the second story.

The third, Bitama's, tells how he succeeds in renewing contact with his brothers and how each of them manages to prosper. They have all respected their father's instructions not to seek to have cows. It is a difficult order for the whole family, but nobody has dared to defy it. But as generations follow each other, the patriarch's commandment becomes more and more difficult to bear. They are no longer obliged to serve the pastoralist masters, but they are condemned never to enjoy everything that the possession of cows would give them, such as milk, the acquisition of the title of wise man or notable, and marriage with the daughters of rich families of the agricultural caste, let alone with those of the pastoral caste. For that, they would have to have cows, for those are the only animals that rich families will accept as bride-wealth payment for their daughters. So, what can Karanda's descendants do, obliged as they are to respect their founding ancestor's will?

2.2 Cows or death: how the cow causes inter-caste conflicts

The cow was formerly the great symbol of wealth, as money is today. As those who had some certainly had an advantage over the others, there were bound to be conflicts between those who had and those who did not. Certain of the privileges which cattle could win for you are spelled out in the words of Makara,

¹⁰ The legend of Ndabaga tells the story of a man who grows too old to serve his pastoralist master and has nobody to replace him, for he has no son. His daughter Ndabaga decides to have her breasts cut off and to disguise herself as a man so as to take his place. The proverbial expression that a situation is as bad as the story of Ndabaga means that it is an utter disaster.

a seventh-generation descendant of Karanda. The latter states that everyone considered milk to be a food superior to meat, and that one cow was worth more than a hundred goats. According to this character, no member of an agriculturalist family ever rose to be a notable and settle disputes in the name of a chief despite the fact that members of this clan were no less wise than most of those who were granted that social rank (Mbonimpa 2001, 92).

Makara cannot accept living all his life in a subordinate position because his family did not own any big-horned animals.¹¹ He must get around Karanda's prohibition without disobeying his will. So, he must find a way to "*Posséder des vaches sans s'exclure du clan ou du monde des vivants ! Posséder des vaches sans recourir au bail ou au contrat de servage*" ('Possess cows without being excluded from the clan or from the world of the living! To possess cows without resorting to renting them or entering into a contract of service') (Mbonimpa 2001, 93). As he tells it, "[...] *les ressortissants de la caste agricole n'avaient pas d'autre choix que de quémander les bêtes à grandes cornes et payer en retour par le consentement au service pour mille générations !*" ('[...] those of the agricultural caste had no choice but to beg for big-horned animals and pay for them by consenting to serve for a thousand generations!') (Mbonimpa 2001, 93). He decides to become a cattle thief, which according to his account is a fairly common custom.¹² When the theft is successful, it is considered an act of bravery and not a crime. However, the thief who is caught is put to death without mercy. The cattle thief, of whatever caste, is glorified, but if he fails the consequences are fatal:

Il y avait une coutume bien établie dans les milieux : on ne pouvait réclamer, pour lui donner une sépulture, le cadavre d'un voleur de vache tué en pleine action. Personne ne conteste le verdict pourtant sacrilège : qui l'attrape le tue et le livre à la dent des hyènes et au bec des vautours, sans autre forme de procès. [...] Mais il y a également des avantages sans lesquels le métier serait si ingrat que personne ne le choisirait. Une coutume voulait que la razzia ne soit pas considérée comme un vulgaire vol, mais comme un métier respecté plus qu'aucun autre. Le vol d'une vache est un acte de bravoure pour lequel on se couvre de gloire. (Mbonimpa 2001, 96-97)¹³

¹¹ The cattle of Rwanda have great long horns.

¹² This fact is confirmed by researchers such as Kagame (1975), Maquet (1954) and Schneider (1973) who have studied the value of cows in African cultures, notably among pastoral peoples.

¹³ There was a well-established custom in those parts: one could not claim the body of a cattle thief killed in the act, to give him proper burial. Nobody argues about this verdict, sacrilegious though it is: whoever catches him kills him and leaves him to the tooth of the hyena and the beak of the vulture, without ceremony. [...] But there are also advantages, without which it would be such a hard trade that nobody would choose it. A custom dictated that the raid is not considered as a mere theft but as a trade respected above all others. The theft of a cow is an act of bravery which covers one in glory.

This cattle theft custom is not just fictional. It is described in Maquet (1954, 164-189). Magnarella (2005, 805) explains that cattle theft was generally prohibited but as the laws about this custom were imposed by the Tutsi, a member of this cast “could steal cattle from a Hutu with impunity as long as the Hutu had no Tutsi lord or patron to protect him” (Magnarella 2005, 805).

Makara, Melchior Mbonimpa’s character, becomes a thief of cattle but has no Tutsi lord protector. Instead of seeking for a Tutsi lord to protect him to succeed in his plan to acquire cattle by theft, Makara decides to ally other young men of his clan with him. Together they manage to build up a large herd of cows, but two members of the renegade band are killed in a raid which goes badly. Makara himself dies of a wound received during an expedition. Although he does not survive to enjoy the wealth and dignity he acquires by possessing cows, he is considered a hero in the memory of the Baranda, for in the words of Tagassa, one of his allies, “*le héros fondateur reste indépassable, mais le héros civilisateur est tout aussi nécessaire aux mortels pour tracer la voie de la lutte incontournable contre l’adversité*” (“the founding hero remains unsurpassable, but the civilizing hero is just as necessary to mortals to trace the path of the inevitable struggle against adversity”) (Mbonimpa 2001, 115).

Makara is the civilizing hero thanks to whom the Baranda are able to accede to high social rank. Not only can they marry the daughters of the wealthiest agricultural families, but they also have access to the daughters of the pastoral caste. This is an important step in the development of the story. At the outset there are two separate communities, the Tutsi pastoral caste and the Hutu agricultural one. For a certain period of time, the first are described as being masters over the second. This social hierarchy changes slightly thanks to the exploits of Makara and his allies, which allow certain descendants of Karanda to become cattle-owners and therefore notables who are eligible to marry daughters of the pastoral caste. The importance of cows in this society, and how the fact of possessing some ensures social promotion, is clear from the following lines:

J’avais souvent entendu dire que n’importe qui pouvait être élu pour siéger parmi ceux qui tranchent les conflits. Cela me faisait sourire, car je ne connaissais aucun ressortissant de la caste des parias qui ait jamais été nommé juge, et avant que Makara ne nous incite à remplir nos kraals de bovins, aucun membre de notre lignage ne fut admis parmi ceux qui tranchent les palabres. C’est parce que j’étais en mesure d’offrir les cadeaux d’usage, une vache et trois cruches d’hydromel, que le chef me désigna pour être initié. On n’accorde la baguette de banyan, symbole de justice que le juge tient dans sa main lors des procès, qu’à ceux qui disposent de vaches. C’est à propos des vaches qu’éclatent les conflits les plus graves. Il est donc inconcevable qu’on puisse arbitrer ces conflits sans être soi-même

propriétaire de vaches. C'est pourquoi j'affirme que c'est Makara qui nous a rendus éligible à cette fonction. (Mbonimpa 2001, 116-117)¹⁴

Tagassa ends his story by stressing an important fact about the social changes which are taking place bit by bit:

J'ai préparé nos fils à porter haut l'étendard du phacochère [animal qui est le totem des Baranda]. Ils sont prêts à affronter à leur tour le mur des castes : nous l'avons fissuré, nous l'avons escaladé, mais il ne s'est pas écroulé. [...] Nos descendants poursuivront le siège de ce mur. Par générations successives, ils reviendront à la charge jusqu'à ce que le mur soit couché par terre, pour devenir un pont entre les castes.
(Mbonimpa 2001, 121)¹⁵

We will come back to the question of the importance of cows and how they are in some measure the origin of the conflicts between the Hutu and the Tutsi.

2.3 Delinquent marriages, or shaking the social order

After Tagassa, who is the first of the Baranda clan to enter the circle of the notables and act as a judge, other Barandas rise to even higher social ranks. Minani, a ninth-generation descendant of Karanda, is the first of the agricultural caste to be promoted to deputy chief and the first to marry a girl whose father is a notable in the pastoral caste. Minani makes it clear what place they occupy in society. Instead of speaking of the pastoral caste, he stresses the fact that the Tutsi girl he marries belongs to the noble class. He declares: "*Jamais un homme de ma caste, fut-il sous-chef, n'avait osé prétendre à la main d'une jeune fille de la noblesse*" ('Never had a man of my caste, even a deputy chief, dared to ask for the hand of a girl from the nobility') (Mbonimpa 2001, 128).

¹⁴ I had often heard tell that anyone could be elected to sit with those who settle disputes. That made me laugh, for I knew nobody from the pariah caste [the Twa] who had ever been appointed a judge, and before Makara incited us to fill our enclosures with cattle, no member of our clan was admitted among those who ended discussion. It is because I was able to offer the customary gifts, a cow and three jars of mead, that the chief chose me to be initiated. The banyan wand, the symbol of justice that the judge holds in his hand during lawsuits, is granted only to those who have cows. Cows are the cause of the most serious conflicts, so it is inconceivable that anyone could settle such a conflict without owning cows himself. That is why I declare that Makara was the one who made us eligible for that post.

¹⁵ I have prepared our sons to bear aloft the standard of the warthog [the Baranda totem animal]. They are ready to confront in their turn the caste wall; we have cracked it, we have climbed it, but it hasn't come down [...]. Our descendants will continue to besiege the wall. Generation after generation will return to the charge until the wall is lying on the ground and becomes a bridge between castes.

Not only is the hierarchical wall coming down, so is the barrier of blood relationship. According to the novel, the Hutu and the Tutsi were not in the habit of intermarrying. This fact is clear also from non-literary authors, such as Kiraranganya (1985, 19), who describes the marriage in 1959 of Prince Louis Rwagasore with a Hutu woman as an extraordinary event.

The name of the Tutsi girl whom Minani marries indicates even more clearly how rare an inter-caste marriage was, especially before colonization. Her name, Karabaye, means 'exceeding the limits'. It is an exclamation one utters to express a great disorder when one is looking at a disaster or an event out of one's control. In persuading a Tutsi notable to give him the hand of his daughter, Minani has accomplished a great exploit, which is repeated by his son Mirimo and his granddaughter Gatamana, of the eleventh generation. Her mother, Mirimo's wife, is of the pastoral caste too, so Gatamana is of mixed blood.¹⁶

In the novel, marriage between a rich Hutu man and a Tutsi woman (man marries up) thus seems to become an accepted custom, but union between a Hutu girl and a Tutsi man (man marries down) is still taboo as when Gatamana becomes pregnant by her cousin (the son of her mother's brother) as the result of a clandestine affair. Although the marriage takes place, thanks to Gatamana's father who gives them a house and everything they need for it, the husband is rejected by his own family for marrying a Hutu woman. This disastrous alliance begins the series of mixed marriages which the author has put together in the chapter entitled *Les noces délinquantes* ('Delinquent marriages'). Among these is the marriage of Bitera and Malibori, who becomes Bitera's wife after being driven out by her father. The soothsayers have predicted that his cows will die because he loves his daughter too much, and big-horned animals being more important than everything else, the father does not hesitate to sacrifice his daughter. Wandering in the forest where she has been abandoned, she is saved and protected by Kagabo, a pariah who is one of her father's servants. Malibori's story also bears witness to the hierarchy existing between the three different castes; we especially learn from it how the pariahs are treated by both the other castes with contempt. But that does not stop Malibori from having an affair with Kagabo and continuing to see him in secret after she has married Bitera. She has to confess that at least two of her children have been conceived with Kagabo. At the end of her story, she proudly proclaims that she has succeeded in mingling all the castes in her womb. Thus, although "delinquent", these alliances play a peacemaking role, and each

¹⁶ There are some beliefs that Hutu, Tutsi, and Twa groups are different genetically, but as Semujanga (2003, 104) rightly puts it: "As everybody knows, groups in Rwanda belong to the human species and the negroid group. Within the situation of traditional Rwanda, differentiations were linked more with economic activity than with a biological content supported by the concept of race."

barrier crossed contributes to bringing the various castes together, which seems to be the message of the novel.

What we learn from the stories, from Karanda's to Nahamira's, is that there is inequality between the agricultural and pastoral castes. We have to recall here not only the fact that the pastoral caste are owners of cows, which is the most valuable economic possession, but also, they are the ones who, in the traditional founding myth, have been appointed to be chiefs of the other two groups. One must also not neglect the fact that the King himself is a member of the pastoralist group and the bearer of all authority. So, pastoralists are the first-class citizens, while the Hutu occupy the second hierarchal position mostly in the service of the latter. The agriculturalists who have become owners of cows by other means than serfdom, who have succeeded in changing their social status, are still not considered the equal of the members of the pastoral caste. The latter affirm their superiority by refusing to marry women of the agricultural caste and by accepting a son-in-law from that caste only with great difficulty. The novel stresses that this superiority is not based on each other's wealth, nor even on their physical appearance. The words uttered in an argument with her mother by Mirimo's daughter, who wants to marry her cousin in the pastoral caste, need no commentary:

Dans le feu de la querelle, j'ai perdu une bonne occasion de me taire en disant une chose humiliante à ma mère : que son neveu ne me lâcherait pas parce qu'il ne trouverait pas dans sa caste une fille aussi belle que moi ! « Mère, je suis plus belle que tu ne l'as jamais été, plus belle qu'aucune femme de ta caste, et plus forte, moins entravée par des coutumes ridicules. Ton neveu, je le prends et je le garde. » [...] Ma mère a riposté sur le même ton : sans frein, de façon écrasante, non pas comme une mère, mais comme une lionne agressée. Elle a tenté de me remettre à ma place en me rappelant que c'est d'elle que je tenais le peu de beauté que les hommes me prêtaient, et que de toutes façons, la noblesse n'était pas une question d'apparences, que la plus laide des filles de sa caste était plus convenable que moi comme épouse pour son neveu, parce que c'était une question de naissance. Elle m'a fait remarquer que mon appartenance de caste était une tare indélébile qui me condamnait à ne connaître les hommes de sa caste que dans les fougères.
(Mbonimpa 2001, 142)¹⁷

¹⁷ In the heat of the quarrel, I spoke when I should have held my tongue, and I said something humiliating to my mother: that her nephew wouldn't let me go, because he wouldn't find in his own caste a girl as beautiful as me! "Mother, I'm more beautiful than you ever were, more beautiful than any woman in your caste, and stronger, less shackled by ridiculous customs. I am taking your nephew and I'm keeping him." [...] My mother shot back equally angrily, not holding herself back, crushing me, not like a mother but like a lioness attacked. She tried to put me in my place by reminding me that such little beauty as men said I had, came from her, and that anyway nobility

We see two important elements here: on one hand the fact that the pastoral caste considered itself superior to the agricultural caste, and on the other hand the agricultural caste's apparently negative opinion of the pastoral caste's customs. We have here two groups who can only be rivals and even enemies, in so far as each thinks itself better than the other based on subsistence wealth and social hierarchy. Without thinking they are the noble caste, the agriculturalists are no more modest, for they perceive their customs as superior. Despite the value accorded to cattle, agriculture is just as important – indeed it is more necessary. As Vansina (2004) has noted:

Usually, herders [pastoralists] needed farmers more than the reverse. Farmers were relatively independent from the herders because their diet included few or no milk products. On the other hand, the menu of seventeenth-century herders certainly also included a porridge of sorghum flour as well as beans, despite their insistence that they only lived on milk, beer from sorghum or other cereals or honey, and roast beef.

(Vansina 2004, 29)

Thus, the agricultural caste know they are indispensable and are proud of it. And yet their hard work and their contribution to the economy has not allowed them to accede to the same social rank as the pastoralists:

Les fiers Baranda sont privés du prestige que confère l'accès aux vaches, mais toutes les terres qu'ils ont défrichées font désormais partie des fiefs des grands seigneurs, eux-mêmes soumis au roi qui est le grand pasteur. En anéantissant la forêt, les Baranda, comme bien d'autres clans de cultivateurs, n'ont fait qu'unifier la prairie : aucune terre n'appartient plus à celui qui l'a défrichée ! Nous n'avons plus que l'usufruit de nos terres, et nous pouvons en être chassés. [...] Nous sommes redevenus des serfs : comme tous ceux de notre caste, nous nous acquittons de redevances envers le chef des troupeaux de la région que nous habitons, parce qu'il est en même temps le chef des terres. Il est vrai que ces redevances seraient multipliées par deux ou plus si nous avons reçu des vaches.

(Mbonimpa 2001, 89-90)¹⁸

wasn't a question of appearance, that the ugliest of girls in her caste were a more suitable match for her nephew than I was, because it was a question of birth. She pointed out that the caste I belonged to was an indelible flaw that condemned me to only knowing men of her caste in the bracken.

¹⁸ The proud Baranda are deprived of the prestige conferred by access to cows; all the land they have cleared is now part of the fiefs of the great lords, who are themselves subjects of the king, the great cattle-owner. By destroying the forest, the Baranda, like many other clans of peasants, merely made greater estates: no land belongs today to those who cleared it! We have only the use of our land, we do not own it, and we can be driven off it. [...] We have become serfs again: like all

It is obvious in Melchior Mbonimpa's novel that the pastoral caste is in a social position superior to the other two castes and is far more privileged. Many examples indicate that the members of the agricultural caste generally live the life of serfs. Even if they are not ridiculed and marginalized as badly as the pariahs, they seem to be regarded by the pastoral caste with a certain disdain, even though certain agriculturalists manage to accede to the rank of notable or deputy chief. Even the members of the pastoral caste who are at the bottom of the social ladder consider those of the agricultural class to be their inferiors:

Certains ressortissants de la caste agricole qui prennent femme dans la caste pastorale ne résistent pas au lien de servage. La majorité de ces mariages mixtes aboutissent donc à un échange inégal qui se fait à sens unique. Le plus misérable des ressortissants de la classe pastorale ne me demandera pas la main de ma fille. (Mbonimpa 2001, 131)¹⁹

2.4 Agriculturalists and pastoralists

The remarks we have quoted above show how deep the divisions were between pastoralists and agriculturalists. One may well ask oneself how one group managed to be so completely dominant that even its least influential members are convinced of their superiority? Unless this passage from Mbonimpa's fiction has nothing to do with the real history of the Hutu and Tutsi, particularly those of Rwanda! Let us examine Minani's words in the light of historical studies.

Kagame (1972), cited in Semujanga (1998, 121), explains that from the administrative point of view Rwanda was divided into several districts or provinces, and each province was divided into hills, and each hill into neighbourhoods. The triple chiefdom or the art of social consensus was applied almost everywhere in the country: a chief of the land (*umunyabutaka*, a Hutu) who was responsible for the agriculturalists and collected agricultural taxes, and who was also the judge in lawsuits about land; plus, a chief of cattle (*umunyamukenke*, a Tutsi), who was in charge of the pastoralists of the province and collected pastoral taxes. In pastoral law, the province was under the authority of a military chief. In charge of each hill there was a chief, Hutu or Tutsi, who was under the provincial chief; he was assisted by an official for each neighbourhood. Lastly, there was a chief of armies, *umunyangabo*, Hutu or Tutsi, who was of equal

those of our caste, we pay taxes to the chief of herds of the region we live in, because he is also the chief of lands. It is true that we would have to pay twice as much or more if we had received cows.

¹⁹ Certain members of the agricultural caste who marry a woman from the pastoral caste cannot resist the bondage of serfdom. Most of these mixed marriages lead to an unequal exchange, which goes one way. Not even the most wretched of the pastoral class will ask for my daughter's hand!

rank with the two provincial chiefs. Kagame (1972) shows that the colonizers created the idea that before they came the Tutsi ruled alone, but that such an idea is anachronistic.

From these statements, it would seem that in pre-colonial times Hutus and Tutsis held important administrative posts in Rwanda. However, Kagame (1972, 32) has also written that when the territory of a local 'patriarch' was annexed, his descent was respected, and his magico-social functions were in practice incorporated into the conquered heritage. In other words, the kinglet was given the task of exercising his previous functions in the name of the king of Rwanda. However, an officer of the court was set in authority over the kinglet, in order to organize the taxes through him, and the kinglet took the title of *umuhinza*, the President of Crops.

This President of Crops, *umuhinza* or (to use the term we saw above) *umunyabutaka*, was subject to the authority of the king, who was a Tutsi, and also had to render account to a court official. In reality, he did not have much authority, but the same was no doubt true of the other chiefs *vis-à-vis* the king, no matter which caste they were of. In any case, this chief of the land was previously like a *mwami* (a king) in his community, but from the moment his land was conquered, he lost the title of king and became a kinglet, or more precisely a mere chief of the land. He had to answer to a king of the pastoral caste and to his delegates such as tax collectors.

The schema offered us by Semujanga's (1998) thesis is that of a society where the members of the two castes were equal in so far as each of them had a special representative who connected them to the king, the holder of all the power and property. This thesis contradicts the idea of social inequality that we find in *Le totem des Baranda* ('The Baranda's totem'). If Kagame (1972) rejects the statements of authors who see the contract of pastoral serfdom as the basic political institution of old Rwanda, he does not deny the existence of that institution, nor that the pastoralists used it as an instrument of conquest. He himself argues in *Un abrégé de l'ethno-histoire du Rwanda* ('A brief ethno-history of Rwanda'), published in 1972, that the main instrument of pastoralist conquests was the Cow. Kagame (1972, 28) explains that pastoralists built up a huge clientele through a powerful system, called *ubuhake*, a contract of pastoral serfdom (as distinct from a contract of land serfdom), by granting one or more head of cattle to those who asked for them. The client obtained the usufruct of this property, and the owner could take his cows back at any time if the servant did not give him complete satisfaction as to the payments due under the contract.

Kagame (1975, 215), however, shies away from calling the system of pastoral serfdom or *ubuhake* practiced by the Tutsi pastoralists an instrument of enslavement of the Hutu. He claims it was a private contract between two

individuals which could be broken by either party. He also points out that any Rwandan of any caste could practice the system of pastoral serfdom if he owned cattle. However, it is reasonable to suppose that the pastoralist caste had the monopoly of this practice, since cattle-raising was its principal strength.

To say that the three castes lived in perfect harmony before colonization, as Twagirumukiza (1994), Semujanga (1998; 2003) and Murashi (2019) do, is no doubt an exaggeration. If such agreement existed between the Hutu and the Tutsi, why were marriages between the two groups almost all one-way, with Hutu men marrying Tutsi women but very rarely the other way around? Perhaps then the thesis of Western authors about inequality between the castes in Rwanda (and also in Burundi) is not as false as some Rwandan authors would have us believe? Otherwise, what do we make of remarks such as those of Maquet (1961, 136), which Lemarchand (2004) supports?

The three Ruanda castes were in a hierarchic order, then, from the standpoint of social power, both collective and individual. The Tutsi caste could as a group inflict severe deprivation on the Hutu or Twa castes, and any individual Tutsi could exert strong pressure on any Hutu or Twa irrespective of their personal qualities and possessions.

(Maquet 1961, 136)

And again:

Ruanda Tutsi (...) allowed Hutu to have cattle at their disposal – which in exchange provided Tutsi with labour and agricultural produce – but at the same time prevented them from gaining independent ownership rights over these cattle. Those who had the final control of cattle were always Tutsi.

(Maquet 1961, 139)

The importance and power linked to the possession of cattle is a fact agreed on by both the Western writers mentioned and Kagame (1972; 1975). Others, such as Herskovits (1955) and Schneider (1973) have written about the role of cows in certain African cultures and the economic importance of these animals.²⁰ The key element in the domination of the pastoral caste over the agricultural caste in the novel is precisely the Cow. It is important to understand how cattle constitute economic power and thus how their possessors came to dominate those who had none. Maquet (1972) expounds this clearly: power and economic wealth go hand in hand. The paragraph below is a true pastoralist creed.

²⁰ In this connection it is interesting to read Harold Schneider's essay entitled *The subsistence role of cattle among the Pakot and in East Africa*, published in *Peoples and cultures of Africa* (1973, 159-187).

[...] cattle in themselves constitute a true economic value, while land, which in traditional Africa is never in short supply, is of value only because of the labor which is expended on it. Every family can be sure of a plot to clear and plant; it cannot obtain possession of a herd by the same means. A herd can be collected without losing any of its value; it does not die out. On the other hand, there is no use in collecting land; if it is not worked its value is nil. In addition, cattle are moveable goods, and do not require their owner to stay in one place; they may be moved without losing any of their value. Finally, since the importance of a herd can be measured by counting the heads of cattle, the value of several herds may be compared with some precision. These few characteristics make cattle into wealth, and enable them to play a role which recalls, though not very closely, that of capital in Western economic systems. The cattle-owner, like the capitalist, receives income without working, sees his income transformed into capital if he does not spend it, can at any time transfer it or exchange it for other goods.

(Maquet 1972, 120)

Thus, the idea that the domination of the Tutsi over the Hutu was possible at least partly due to the possession of cows is not a legend (those with wealth hold power). However, it seems an exaggeration to claim that land was something which one could obtain easily: that statement is belied by the existence of the system of *ubukonde* (the contract between the owner of land and his serf). On the other hand, to maintain that the owners of land had the same power as the cattle-raisers seems equally exaggerated, seeing how important cows were. If it is true that in *ubuhake* (the contract of pastoral serfdom) the client was free to break the contract, one can imagine the harm he would suffer if he did: he would be giving up access to the symbol of wealth and dignity. One can understand the determination of some of them to maintain the contract in the hope of one day possessing these highly prized goods.

Kagame (1972) claims one could acquire cows by other means than serfdom: they could be exchanged for other material goods or obtained by marriage. But here again, since the man's family paid the bride-wealth, and since few pastoralist men married agriculturalist women, the pastoralists gained the most (through this system, the wealth flowed in one direction, rather than representing true reciprocity and redistribution as bride-wealth is meant to do). As Minani says in *Le totem des Baranda* ('The Baranda's totem'):

L'échange sera toujours inégal, toujours déséquilibré tant que la circulation des femmes n'aura pas lieu dans les deux sens. Nous resterons leurs obligés

tant qu'ils seront les seuls à donner des femmes, comme ils ont longtemps été les seuls à prêter des vaches. (Mbonimpa 2001, 132)^{21 22}

As for exchanging a cow for other goods, one wonders how much that would have cost the person who decided on such a trade, seeing how important cows were. It may be that the Hutus' quest for cows ruined them or condemned them to serfdom.²³

Behind Karanda's story and those of each of his descendants lies the history of the whole agricultural caste. It is true that *Le totem des Baranda* ('The Baranda's totem') is a work of fiction and that as such, not every word in it is to be taken literally. However, it gives the impression of having been written according to a precise historical plan. The stories in chapters 2 and 3, which we have summarized and tried to briefly analyze, echo the pre-colonial period. One can see in them the relations which used to exist among the two castes discussed (the Hutu and the Tutsi), and also a number of socio-cultural facts through which we discover the functioning of the political and economic system of Rwanda (and Burundi), and how it evolved.

The novel suggests that formerly each of these two castes (Hutu and Tutsi)²⁴ had a certain autonomy *vis-à-vis* the others. Thus, Karanda says the people of his homeland did not own cows and did not know the property system which confers on one group superiority over the others. His story suggests communities which are quite distinct but progressively come into contact with each other. Here is his portrayal of two different societies:

J'ai compris petit à petit que le détenteur du cheptel était détenteur de tout. La famille de Kagoma n'avait pas de droits de propriété, ni sur les deux

²¹ The exchange will always be unequal, always unbalanced, as long as the movement of women isn't in both directions. We will remain obliged to them as long as they are the only ones to give wives, as they were for a long time the only ones to lend cows.

²² As Mauss (1967, 211) showed in his work *The gift*: "The obligation to give and to receive are very important. To refuse to give or to receive, is to reject the bond of alliance and commonality. It is like the recipient has some kind of right of property over everything that belongs to the donor and this ownership is conceived as a spiritual bond. All things are there for passing on and for balancing accounts."

²³ In order to gain wealth which translates into the possession of cows, Hutu men had to become servants to pastoralists and as such, they condemned themselves to serfdom. It could take years even generations of service to a pastoralist before they could acquire a cow.

²⁴ Not much was said about the Twa caste in *Le totem des Baranda* ('The Baranda's totem'). The Twa were considered inferior by both the Hutu and the Tutsi. Through folk tales and legends, the Twa seem to have been used by the two other castes for activities that neither of them wanted to do, such as assassinating somebody, or disposing of a girl who became pregnant before marriage, etc.

vaches qui rentraient dans son enclos, ni sur la terre que sa famille cultivait après avoir rempli les tâches consenties au chef. Les droits d'occupation de la terre et l'usufruit des vaches étaient octroyés et révocables par le chef. Dans la plaine de mon enfance, les droits de propriété de la terre étaient tout aussi inexistantes. Mais la terre appartenait à tout le monde, et le droit d'usage qui revenait simplement au premier occupant n'était ni octroyé, ni révocable. On y renonçait par le déménagement, et, à ce moment, un autre individu pouvait occuper la terre laissée vacante. Il n'y avait pas de vaches, mais seulement des chèvres et des moutons, et ce petit bétail n'était pas prêté : il appartenait bel et bien aux familles. (Mbonimpa 2001, 55)²⁵

From Karanda's story we learn that he is of the agricultural caste, since he says his family practiced agriculture and raised only sheep and goats. As one can read in Kagame's *Un abrégé de l'ethno-histoire du Rwanda* ('A brief ethno-history of Rwanda') (1972, vol. 1, 20): "*Les Bahutu forment l'immense majorité de la population. Ils appartiennent à la vaste civilisation des agriculteurs et ce sont eux qui ont défriché la forêt couvrant le Rwanda. L'élevage de la chèvre appartient sans conteste à leur culture.*"²⁶

Karanda also says they had no cows. The first one he ever sees is when he meets Kagoma, the man who gives him refuge and later marries him to his daughter. The situation in which Kagoma's family lives hints at the existence of two communities, one of which, the pastoral caste, has a certain amount of power over the other one. Again, we can tell that Kagoma is of the agricultural caste because the community he belongs to is described as similar to the one in the region Karanda comes from. The only difference is that men, whose experience reminds Karanda of his origins, live as serfs, a concept unknown in his home country. This leads us to assume that the nomadism of agriculturalists in search of fertile land and of pastoralists looking for good pastures for their cattle resulted in contacts between castes, at first quite accidentally but later by conquest. We know that certain Tutsi clans, for example the Nyiginya in Rwanda, conquered the

²⁵ I understood little by little that the owner of cattle owned everything. Kagoma's family had no property rights, neither over the two cows in his enclosure, nor over the land his family cultivated after fulfilling the agreed-upon duties for the chief. The right to occupy land and the usufruct of the cows were granted by the chief, who could revoke them. In the plain of my childhood, property rights did not exist either. The land belonged to everyone, and the right of use which the first occupier had was not a grant and could not be revoked. One renounced it by moving away, and at that moment another person could occupy the land left vacant. There were no cows, just sheep and goats, and those little animals were not lent: they belonged to the families.

²⁶ The Bahutu form the immense majority of the population. They belong to the vast civilization of agriculturalists, and they are the people who cleared the forest that used to cover Rwanda. Raising goats is incontestably part of their culture.

country progressively. We know also that for a long-time, certain Hutu chiefdoms resisted these conquerors, which explains the existence of places where the intermingling of castes did not happen for some time. For example, historians such as Vansina (2004) and Nahimana (1981) agree that the Hutu of northern Rwanda remained independent until the 1920s.

Karanda's story thus offers us a sort of historical survey of the old days, before Rwanda and Burundi became kingdoms, each with a monarch who was the master of all the castes except in some community regions which had not yet been conquered. The stories of his closest descendants show how the entire agricultural caste progressively became serfs, even those, like his sons, who had refused to beg for cows from the Tutsi owners. *Le totem des Baranda* ('The Baranda's totem') recalls that the Tutsi domination over the Hutu was achieved not only by cows, but also by force.

Maquet (1972) shows the links between cattle-raising and the use of the spear. The spear and the bow and arrow were the principal weapons used in the pre-colonial period. The pastoralists, who were often on the move, had to learn to defend themselves against attacks. Given that the time they spent guarding their animals was not being used for tasks such as agriculture or other economic activities, they passed the time learning to use these weapons. The need to learn to fight to defend themselves and their animals meant that the pastoral peoples became expert warriors, whereas the agriculturalists, being more sedentary and having to devote more time to their fields, did not develop the same military skills. As a result, writes Maquet (1972):

[...] when the East African pastoralists settled in farming country, they dominated the cultivators, who, having no fighting force strong enough to resist them, could not prevent them from settling. Also, wanting to gain possession of this valuable commodity, cattle, they became dependent on the invaders. Thus, the pastoralists were able without much difficulty to establish themselves as masters. (Maquet 1972, 123-124)

Maquet's remarks confirm the words of the fictional Makara, who says:

*[...] tout le monde considérait le lait comme un aliment supérieur à la viande, et une seule vache valait plus que cent chèvres.
[...] les ressortissants de la caste agricole n'avaient pas d'autre choix que de quémander les bêtes à grandes cornes et payer en retour par le*

consentement au service pour mille générations.

(Mbonimpa 2001, 92-93)²⁷

Makara, as we saw earlier, is a descendant of Karanda who refused to simply submit and so decided to become a cow-owner by other means than renting them. He became a successful cattle thief, thus enabling his descendants to join the ranks of the notables.

So not only did the cow give milk; a man's wealth was measured by the number of cows he had. It was the animal used to change social status, to seal marriages, or to obtain the favour of a chief. This is confirmed by Kagame (1972) who writes that a Hutu who acquired a large herd of cows could change his caste and become a Tutsi, while a Tutsi who no longer had any cattle, and hence had lost his source of identity as a pastoralist, could be relegated to the rank of the second-class citizens, i.e., the Hutus.

2.5 The fifteenth generation, or the fight for justice and equality for all

After the cattle raids and the delinquent marriages to bring the castes together, other events happen to Karanda's descendants. The arrival of the German, and later Belgian, colonizers will have a profound impact on their story. They are described as a fourth caste. By force of arms, they defeat the king, his chiefs and his armies and impose themselves as superior to all the castes of the country, pariahs, agriculturalists, and pastoralists alike. This new superior caste does not, however, change the inequality among the existing ones. On the contrary, as Bitera, an agriculturalist, tells us:

Les « oreilles roses » formèrent une quatrième caste, au-dessus des pasteurs, des serfs et des parias. Sans supprimer la corvée due à tous les maîtres, ils imposèrent aux serfs d'autres types de travaux obligatoires. Dans tout le royaume, on nous mobilisa pour tracer des routes, construire de grandes huttes en pierre ou en briques cuites, faire pousser d'immenses champs de café.

(Mbonimpa 2001, 176)²⁸

Here, we see that colonial wealth, which depended on globally saleable products (agricultural products, and natural resources such as timber and rubber,

²⁷ [...] everyone considered milk a superior food to meat, and one cow was worth more than a hundred goats. [...] those of the agricultural caste had no choice but to beg for big-horned animals and pay for them by consenting to serve for a thousand generations!

²⁸ The "pink ears" formed a fourth caste, above the pastoralists, the serfs and the pariahs. Without abolishing the labour due to all the masters, they imposed on the serfs other kinds of compulsory work. Throughout the kingdom, we were mobilized to build roads, put up great huts of stone or brick, and grow huge fields of coffee.

etc.), found a ready work force in the Hutu. Representing 85% of the work force, and already familiar (unlike the Tutsi) with agricultural labour, this reorients a made-to-order situation for a colonial power. It is also historically the case that it is exceptionally difficult to get pastoralists to comply with the tasks noted in Bitera's quote above.

Bitera makes it clear that the caste that had to provide this extra labour was that of the agriculturalists. Historians find that this really happened, although some maintain that pastoralists who were poor suffered the same treatment. It is fair to say, however, that it was mainly the agriculturalists who suffered this insult, and not just because they formed 85% of the population. Many of them now carried a double burden: on top of their labour (*ubuhake*) for the pastoralists, they now had to provide labour (*uburetwa*) to the colonizers. Some of the changes which followed colonization are well described in the stories of Nahamira, Mabano and Nikiza.

Nahamira tells us about how Christianity was received and how it overthrew certain social structures, notably the traditional institution of marriage. Practices such as polygyny, the law of levirate,²⁹ and spiritual beliefs, lost their importance. Those who accepted Christianity had to give up these ancestral customs. Gashikanwa, Nahamira's husband, had to take care of his own fields and also of those of his father's widow, whom he had not been able to take as his second wife because Christian law forbade polygyny – all this in addition to his work for the colonizers. As a result, his father's widow was alone with her children and with no husband to help her. In addition, Nahamira, like many other women at the time, had to take on both women's and men's responsibilities, since their husbands were busy elsewhere, working in the fields of industrial crops (cotton, coffee, tea) and building roads, churches, and houses for the colonizers or for the notables. As Mabano, the son of Gashikanwa and Nahamira, tells us:

Avant de me marier, je devais construire ma propre maison. [...] Ce fut la plus belle maison de la région : plus belle que celle du chef coutumier construite par les Blancs avec une main-d'œuvre servile.

(Mbonimpa 2001, 215-216)³⁰

²⁹ The law of levirate simply states that a man (already married or not) must marry his brother's (biological or socially classified brother) widow. This was especially important if the widow in question had not yet conceived a son before the death of her husband – the brother was responsible for ensuring that his dead brother's line continued.

³⁰ Before I got married, I had to build my own house [...] It was the most beautiful house in the region: more beautiful than that of the customary chief, built by the Whites with slave labour.

By slave labour, no doubt, Hutu are meant, for very few of them had reached the status of customary chief. Rosamond Halsey Carr, who lived in Rwanda in the colonial period, describes well the treatment meted out to the Hutu at the time:

Les Tutsis formaient la tribu des rois féodaux du Ruanda et représentaient un assez petit pourcentage de la population. Cette minorité aristocratique dirigeait le pays en étroite collaboration avec l'administrateur colonial belge. En règle générale, seuls les Tutsis pouvaient accéder à un emploi dans l'administration, l'éducation ou les cultes. (Halsey Carr 1999, 111)³¹

A remark of Halsey Carr's confirms Mabano's testimony as to the Hutus' servant status:

Les épouses et les filles des nobles s'aventuraient rarement très loin à pied. Elles se déplaçaient en tipoy avec leurs serviteurs hutus. (Halsey Carr 1999, 111)³²

Clearly, then, the Hutu were of lower status than the Tutsi and in many ways their situation grew worse in the colonial period.³³ For example, they had always been credited with second sight and magical powers, but with the advent of Christianity these traditional beliefs lost their status. *Le totem des Baranda* ('The Baranda's totem') uses the character of Nahamira to speak of this. She has second sight, but is no longer at ease using her supernatural powers, nor is she really free to do so. When she sees in a dream that there will be fratricidal conflicts between castes, her own sons do not believe her, because now they have more faith in Christian teachings than in their ancestral traditions. Only her younger son Nikiza takes her seriously and he is the only one to survive the bloody events which pit the agriculturalists against the pastoralists. Nikiza's story in fact, gives a good

³¹ The Tutsi formed the tribe of the feudal kings of Rwanda and constituted a fairly small percentage of the population. This aristocratic minority ran the country in close collaboration with the Belgian colonial administrator. In general, only the Tutsi could obtain a post in the administration, education, or religion.

³² The wives and daughters of the nobility seldom went very far on foot. They went about in tipoy with their Hutu servants.

³³ As Uvin (1998, 33) states: "Under these conditions, it is no wonder that the struggle for independence also became an ethnic struggle – a fight as much against the (remote) Belgians as against the (much closer) local Tutsi acolytes [...] Although not all Tutsi were wealthy and powerful under colonial rule, it is clear that almost no Hutu were; it is equally clear that the vast majority of Hutu suffered greatly from the increased demands (including onerous taxation and forced labour) placed on them during colonial rule."

fictional picture of the 1972 tragedy in Burundi, but let us return to Mabano's, which narrates the key events of the end of the colonial era.

Mabano is of the fifteenth generation of Karanda's descendants. He is one of the first in his region to be educated by the colonizers and so rises to be the inspector of all the schools in his province. This title is a great honour and wins him the respect of agriculturalists and pastoralists alike. But before he attains this status, he suffers from an aspect of his society which we have already seen: the assumption of superiority by those of the pastoral caste towards his own. This attitude is reflected in the humiliating punishments that the principal of the school he attended (a black priest, a pastoralist) inflicts on the children of the agricultural caste. Mabano tells how this priest punishes and humiliates him for an unfortunate but unintentional incident:

[...] l'abbé m'avait saisi le nez et l'écrasait entre le pouce et l'index. Cela me faisait très mal. À la douleur physique s'ajoutait l'humiliation car, pour cet abbé, pincer le nez était une manière de ridiculiser les enfants de ma caste, une manière de suggérer que notre nez était trop épaté. Les autres élèves qui comprenaient trop bien l'insulte que je subissais se sont mis à pouffer de rire.
(Mbonimpa 2001, 211)³⁴

The colonizers who described the Hutu also saw in them defects which they linked to their physical traits. They described the Tutsi as more intelligent, more handsome, and more like Caucasians than Blacks. Prunier (1997) explains how this exacerbated the hierarchical gulf that existed already between the Hutu and the Tutsi. The Hutu in Mbonimpa's novel, such as Mabano, his brothers and many others, who end up taking part in the struggle for independence from the Belgian colonizers, understand too late that this struggle would not lead to union of the castes. Mabano's words here need no commentary:

Le passage de l'ère coloniale à l'ère de l'indépendance ressembla à ces interrègnes précoloniaux : la compétition pour s'emparer du pouvoir laissé vacant par les colonisateurs opposa les castes selon le modèle de la confrontation sanglante des princes. L'ordre nouveau commença par l'élimination physique d'une dizaine d'élus de ma caste, tous partis confondus. Impossible d'interpréter cela comme un dérapage du conflit des

³⁴ [...] the priest had seized my nose and was crushing it between his thumb and index finger. It hurt a lot. To the physical pain was added humiliation, because for this priest, pinching noses was a way of making fun of the children of my caste, a way of suggesting that our noses were too flat. The other children, who understood all too well the insult I was suffering, started to giggle.

partis : la guerre des castes s'installait à la place de la compétition démocratique. (Mbonimpa 2001, 220)³⁵

Like all his brothers, except the youngest,³⁶ Mabano dies at the hands of those who wish to have the monopoly of power. The massacres told in Mabano's story mark the beginning of a long road of violence that is like what can be observed in the historiography of Burundi and Rwanda.

3. Conclusion

In this article, I have shown how the Hutu and the Tutsi were first distinct communities based on their professions, with one group being land farmers and the other one, cattle herders. As cattle were economically more valuable than possessing land, cattle owners were perceived as superior to the landowners both socially and economically. Their power was also due to the fact they had to learn military art to protect their animals as well as themselves while searching for good pastures.

Colonization did not bring equality between the Hutu and the Tutsi but rather maintained the same hierarchical imbalance.

In Rwanda, when they no longer had the support of the Tutsi, the colonizers helped the Hutu become the leaders of the newly independent country. The Tutsi were then not only removed from power but also from all the privileges they had enjoyed before and during colonization.

In Burundi, the Tutsi and the Hutu fought together against the colonizers to gain independence but as their army was dominated by the Tutsi, the latter remained masters of the new country. The resulting antagonism between the Tutsi and the Hutu of Burundi led to the attempt by the Tutsi to eliminate the Hutu elite in 1972. Sadly, this was never recognized as an act of genocide by the UN.

In Rwanda, when the Tutsi lost power, many of them fled the country and formed a rebel movement, the RPF ('Rwandan Patriotic Front'), led by Paul Kagame, the current President of Rwanda, that regularly tried to invade the

³⁵ The transition from the colonial era to that of independence was like those precolonial interregnums: the struggle for the power left vacant by the colonizers pitted caste against caste on the model of the bloody confrontation of princes. The new order began with the murder of a dozen leaders of my caste, regardless of party. You couldn't interpret that as a blip in party strife: the caste war took the place of democratic competition.

³⁶ Nikiza, Mabano's youngest brother, tells us in his story how the 1972 massacre of the Hutu in Burundi happened. This fictional character only just escapes but, in reality, thousands of people died. His account appears to be taken from Kiraranganya's *La vérité sur le Burundi* ('The truth about Burundi') (1985), which confirms yet again that this novel is based on real events.

country to regain power. At every attempted invasion, the Tutsi still living in Rwanda became scapegoats and experienced violence and injustice. When the RPF conquered the North of the country in 1990, heinous radio broadcasts started corrupting the minds of the Hutu population making them believe that the Tutsi were going to take over the country and reinstate the system of *ubuhake* ('pastoral serfdom'), in essence to enslave them once again.

The flame of hatred towards the Tutsi was ignited. With the assassination of both Hutu presidents of Rwanda and Burundi on April 6th, 1994, Rwanda turned into an uncontrollable killing zone. The 1994 Tutsi genocide also claimed innumerable Hutu lives – a fact that is regrettably often denied.

The choice of *Le totem des Baranda* ('The Baranda's totem') to show the reasons behind the inter-ethnic conflicts between the Hutu and the Tutsi was also a way of reminding the world of the Hutu's sufferings, as this novel focuses on the latter. There are no doubt some who will maintain that *Le totem des Baranda* ('The Baranda's totem') only presents the perspective of one caste, the agricultural Hutu. However, there are many more books which speak only of the crimes committed against the Tutsi and it is only reasonable that someone should tell the Hutu's side of the story. Importantly, a large part of the novel, especially from the fifteenth generation onwards, is concerned with ways to end the caste war. The stories of Birezi, Shanga, Sadaka, Shabani and Jamila essentially narrate the various strategies which could be applied to end the fratricidal conflicts and political instability that continue to plague Great Lakes Africa.

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