

Elite versus Alliance:

A discursive approach to the locus of agency in the Rwanda Genocide



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## Introduction

In one hundred days, between 6 April and 4 July 1994, extremist Hutu and their followers murdered between five hundred thousand and one million Tutsi in Rwanda. The women, men, and children who were slaughtered were of the same race and shared the same language, faith, and tradition as the ones who slaughtered them. The decisive boundary between life and death was whether you identified as ethnically Hutu or Tutsi. There was a very high level of civilian participation, and a huge number of perpetrators knew their victims as neighbors.<sup>1</sup> How do “ordinary” citizens turn into neighbor-murdering killing machines?

The answer to this question can be found in two main theories regarding ethnic violent conflict: the elite theory and the alliance theory. As will be discussed in Chapter 2, the first theory, with scholars like Mamdani, Gourevitch and Prunier, understands ethnic war as a top-down, elite-driven struggle for power. At the other end of the spectrum, alliance theorists, like Kalyvas, Keen and Brass, argue that the locus of agency is as likely to be at the bottom of society.<sup>2</sup> The main question of this thesis is how the elite and alliance theory relate to each other in practice when studying the Rwandan genocide. Does one of the two serve a more comprehensive explanatory factor for this particular case than the other?

So far, the literature has not given a satisfactory answer to this question. In *Genocide: A Comprehensive Introduction* by Adam Jones, a satisfying overview of the Rwandan genocide is offered.<sup>3</sup> A lot of underlying factors and important key moments are discussed in other literature.<sup>4</sup> However, no answer is given to the question of the locus of agency and the reason why people resorted to the use of violence in the Rwandan genocide. Although a lot of information is proposed, no balance is made up between the probability of agency at either the top or the bottom of society (preferring respectively the elite or the alliance theory). This thesis will use discourse analysis as a method to evaluate interviews with perpetrators of the Rwandan genocide to make up this balance. By doing so, and by combining theories with practical perception of perpetrators, this thesis is of added value to the existing literature on the subject.

The aforementioned interviews are bundled in a book by Jean Hatzfeld, *Machete Season*. When working with interviews, there are certain pitfalls one should be aware of. Tim May has written in *Interviewing: methods and process* that one of the most important things to take into consideration is the next duality: “An account given

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<sup>1</sup> Donatien Nikuzie, ‘The Genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda: Origins, Causes, Implementation, Consequences and the Post-genocide era’, *International Journal of Development* 3(5), (2014) 1068-1069.

<sup>2</sup> Jolle Demmers, ‘Identity, Boundaries and Violence’ in J. Demmers, *Theories of Violent Conflict* (New York and London 2012) 31.

<sup>3</sup> Adam Jones, *Genocide: A Comprehensive Introduction*, (New York, 2017).

<sup>4</sup> For example: Dale Tatum, *Genocide at the Dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Rwanda, Bosnia, Kosovo, and Darfur*, (New York 2019); Samuel Totten, *We Cannot Forget: Interviews with Survivors of the 1994 Genocide in Rwanda*, (New Brunswick 2011); Maria van Haperen, ‘The Rwandan Genocide: 1994’, in B. Boender, U. Ümit Üngör, W. ten Have (eds.), *The Holocaust and Other Genocides: An Introduction* (Amsterdam 2012), pp 98-115; Alain Des Forges, *Leave None to Tell the Story: Genocide in Rwanda* (New York 1999).

during an interview is an index of location in a material world, and an index of moral position in a world of discursive values".<sup>5</sup> In other words, the analysis of interviews should not only be concerned with motivation, but also take the social identity and its construction of the interviewee into consideration. Important to remember is that testimonies are incomplete and take place in a certain setting. Therefore, it is important to possess a full comprehension of that context.<sup>6</sup>

In order to provide this context, this thesis will first present an overview of the historical context of the genocide in general, offering insight in events that (in)directly led to the Rwandan genocide and have shaped the thoughts of the *génocidaires*. To provide more knowledge about the theoretical framework which I will be working with to analyze the source, the second chapter will dive into concepts like (social) identity, ethnicity and theories about the relation between ethnicity and violence. Here, I will also elaborate on my methodology. The third chapter will begin by briefly providing more context on the source. Then, the methodology offered in Chapter 2 will be applied to the source in order to find out in what way the elite or the alliance theory can be traced back to perpetrator testimonies. This thesis will conclude by offering a comprehensive overview of the conducted analysis, placing the thesis in perspective and by suggesting suitable options for subsequent research.

## Chapter 1 – Historical Context

Although the dichotomy between Hutu and Tutsi that reached its extremely painful pinnacle in the Rwandan genocide is embedded in history, this apparent divide in ethnicity was not always as evident. In fact, it seems off to describe Hutu and Tutsi as different ethnic groups, taking into consideration that they share the same language, territory and religion.<sup>7</sup> It is hard to imagine how people who seem so similar evolve into a division where belonging in one of the ethnic groups became a matter of life and death.<sup>8</sup> Based on existing literature and through historical analysis, this chapter will provide a chronological overview of the evolution of ethnicity in Rwanda, as ethnicity in precolonial times was not a fixed concept. The purpose is to describe important events as conceptual building blocks for the analysis of the source in Chapter 3.

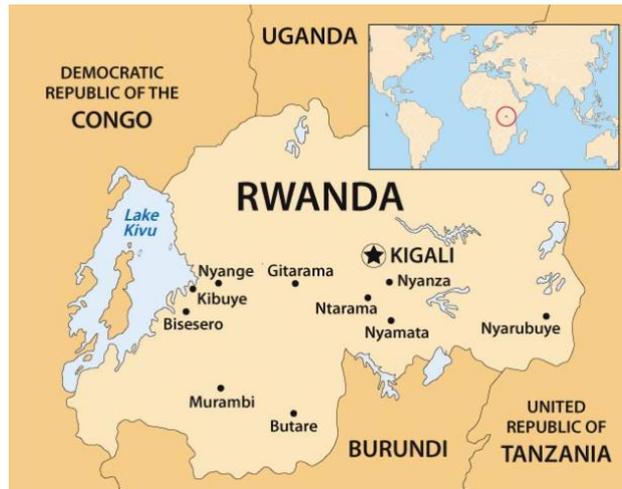
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<sup>5</sup> Tim May, 'Interviewing: Methods and Process' in *Social Research: Issues, Methods and Process* (Buckingham 2002) 140.

<sup>6</sup> May, 'Interviewing: Methods and Process', 141.

<sup>7</sup> Des Forges, *Leave None to Tell the Story*, 36.

<sup>8</sup> Jones, *Genocide*, 474.



Map 1.1 Rwanda  
 Source: Map provided by WorldAtlas.com

Rwanda is a country in Africa’s Great Lake District. The map above shows its neighboring countries DRC, Uganda, Burundi and Tanzania. It also locates Nyamata, the location of the testimonies of the *génocidaires* upon which my research is based. Hutu came from the North West, while Tutsi came from the south and east of Lake Victoria (Tanzania).<sup>9</sup>

#### Hutu-Tutsi Relations Prior To Colonial Influence

The Rwandan conflict has been described as an expression of ancient hatreds.<sup>10</sup> However, Mahmood Mamdani notes that: “Although Rwanda was definitely not a land of peace and bucolic harmony before the arrival of the Europeans, there is no trace in its precolonial history of systematic violence between Tutsi and Hutu as such”.<sup>11</sup> Up until the twentieth century, there was no clear distinction between the two groups, as Hutu and Tutsi share very similar traits. They speak the same language (Kinyarwanda), live in the same area, are used to the same traditions and belong to the same clan.<sup>12</sup> Rather than two different ethnicities, the groups, in the period prior to colonial influence, could better be seen as *social castes* which were based on material wealth.

The majority of the population made a living out of agriculture.<sup>13</sup> In this divide, Tutsis owned cattle and Hutus tilled the land and provided labor to the Tutsis.<sup>14</sup> Both groups lived in clans where people were submissive to their clan leaders. The leaders

<sup>9</sup> Van Haperen, ‘The Rwandan Genocide, 1994’, 98.

<sup>10</sup> Jones, *Genocide*, 474.

<sup>11</sup> Jones, *Genocide*, 474.

<sup>12</sup> Tatum, *Genocide at the Dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, 40.

<sup>13</sup> Van Haperen, ‘The Rwandan Genocide, 1994’, 98.

<sup>14</sup> Jones, *Genocide*, 474.

of the clans were loyal to the *mwami* (Kinyarwanda: the king), who came from the Tutsi community, but they retained a certain degree of autonomy.<sup>15</sup>

Because only few people owned cattle, Hutu were seen as the masses. Status was based on the possession of cattle. A shift in castes was even possible. If a Hutu acquired enough cattle to rise through the socioeconomic hierarchy, he could *kwihutura* (Kinyarwanda: shed Hutuness), and achieve the political status of a Tutsi. Vice versa, loss of property meant *gucupira* (Kinyarwanda: loss of status) for a Tutsi.<sup>16</sup> Mixed marriages between Hutu and Tutsi often occurred. The ability to switch from group and intermarriage show that being either Hutu or Tutsi was not yet as fixed as it would be.<sup>17</sup>

## Hutu-Tutsi Relations under Colonial Influence

### German Influence

The Berlin Colonial Conference of 1884-1885 marked the beginning of colonial influence in Rwanda. Here, the country was assigned to Germany. The Germans tried to impose colonial rule through the use of local leaders. The *mwami* strengthened and centralized his authority. Early explorers of Central Africa coined the “Hamitic hypothesis”. According to this thesis, the Hutu were offspring of Ham, who is seen as the father of the black Africans, while the Tutsi population originated from a Nilotic civilization in Northern Africa.<sup>18</sup> The mark of civilization was based on a physiognomic difference. While the generally taller, allegedly more developed Tutsis were seen as destined to rule, the shorter, supposedly less developed Hutus were bound to serve.<sup>19</sup> The German colonizers drew on the Hamite theory to increase the predominant position of the Tutsi. This can be seen as the beginning of the process where belonging to either of the groups started to matter.

### Belgian Influence

The Treaty of Versailles (1919) forced Germany to hand over its colonies. Rwanda was assigned to Belgium.<sup>20</sup> Under Belgian rule, the population of Rwanda was classified as either Hutu, Tutsi or Twa/Pygmy. The distribution of identity cards defining every Rwandan’s ethnicity was the symbol of the newly-bureaucratized system. The previous permeability of Hutu/Tutsi *caste* identities, became codified *ethnic* identities.<sup>21</sup> Identity cards would later prove a decisive factor in the matter of life and death in 1994, as a genocidal facilitator.<sup>22</sup> There was no more place for ethnic ambiguity in

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<sup>15</sup> Van Haperen, ‘The Rwandan Genocide, 1994’, 99.

<sup>16</sup> Jones, *Genocide*, 474.

<sup>17</sup> Van Haperen, ‘The Rwandan Genocide, 1994’, 99.

<sup>18</sup> Jones, *Genocide*, 475.

<sup>19</sup> Jones, *Genocide*, 475.

<sup>20</sup> Van Haperen, ‘The Rwandan Genocide, 1994’, 99-100.

<sup>21</sup> Jones, *Genocide*, 472.

<sup>22</sup> Jones, *Genocide*, 475.

colonial Rwanda.<sup>23</sup> Chapter 2 will further elaborate on the theoretical background of identity, ethnicity and their link to violence.

Under the Belgian rule, ethnic identity became further institutionalized through key institutions (church, education, state-administration). These were organized around these ethnic identities. As under de Germans, Tutsis were favored. They were assigned a dominant role in each of these institutions, which automatically meant the degradation of Hutus. Only Tutsi had access to education, were allowed to collect taxes and had the right to move freely. By rigidly codifying Hutu and Tutsi designation, Tutsis became the colonial favorites and protégés.<sup>24</sup> This contributed to Tutsi loyalty to the colonial power. At the same time, as the poor masses consisted mainly of Hutus, Hutu frustrations grew over the years.<sup>25</sup> The Tutsi elite was happy to believe their natural superiority. Many Hutu became convinced that the two ethnic groups were indeed different in nature.<sup>26</sup>

### Independent Rwanda

The end of the Second World War meant a turning point for Belgian ethnic policy. Pro-independence movements were springing up throughout the country. These were popular among highly-educated Tutsi. Because the Belgians wanted to avoid a war of independence, they stopped the favoring of the Tutsi. From that moment on, Hutus were appointed to functions that before had been reserved for Tutsi. In 1957 and with approval of the Belgian government, the Party of Hutu Emancipation Movement (MDR-Parmehutu), was founded.<sup>27</sup>

Soon, it became clear that the Hutu, too, were aiming for independence. Based on the Hamitic hypothesis, MDR-Parmehutu leaders argued that Tutsi, allegedly originating in North Africa, did not belong in Rwanda and were intruders in their land. When the *mwami*, the old Tutsi king, died in 1959, the Hutu revolted against the Tutsi and the Hutu social revolution was declared.<sup>28</sup> This ended in the first pregenocidal wave of massacres, with several thousand victims. Thousands of other Tutsis fled to neighboring countries.<sup>29</sup>

### Rwanda under President Kayibanda

Rwanda celebrated its independence in July 1962. In 1963, Tutsi fighting units attempted to overthrow the regime of the new president, Grégoire Kayibanda of the MDR. As a reaction, Kayibanda mobilized the mainly-Hutu population by playing on fears of threatening Tutsi tyranny. He referred to Tutsi as “cockroaches”, as vermin

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<sup>23</sup> Gerald Caplan, ‘The 1994 Genocide of the Tutsi of Rwanda’, in Samuel Totten and William Parsons (eds.), *Cenuries of Genocide: Essays and Eyewitness Accounts* (New York 2013) 449.

<sup>24</sup> Jones, *Genocide*, 475.

<sup>25</sup> Van Haperen, ‘The Rwandan Genocide, 1994’, 99-100.

<sup>26</sup> Caplan, ‘The 1994 Genocide of the Tutsi of Rwanda’, 449.

<sup>27</sup> Van Haperen, ‘The Rwandan Genocide, 1994’, 100.

<sup>28</sup> Van Haperen, ‘The Rwandan Genocide, 1994’, 100.

<sup>29</sup> Jones, *Genocide*, 476.

that had to be exterminated. Consequently, the Hutus drove Tutsi out of their houses.<sup>30</sup> In a series of attacks between 1959-1967, an estimated 20,000 Tutsi were killed and 300,000 fled to neighboring countries.<sup>31</sup> The dehumanizing use of language to refer to the “other” is an important factor in violent conflict, as will become clear in Chapter 2. Its use with regard to the Rwandan genocide will be further be demonstrated in Chapter 3.

#### Rwanda under President Habyarimana

Kayibanda’s exploitation of ethnic fears did not save his regime. In 1973, Juvénal Habyarimana, head of the Rwandan army, came to power by a coup d’état.<sup>32</sup> Under Habyarimana, the ethnic divide stayed in effect in a reversed form: favoring Hutu over Tutsi. He outlawed mixed marriages in 1976. Although ethnically motivated killings still took place in the 1970s, the Tutsi minority was relatively safe compared to the ‘50s and ‘60s.<sup>33</sup> To attract foreign aid, the president projected a liberal image to the international community. At the same time, his regime was dominated by the *akazu*, a mafia of Hutus that circulated around Habyarimana’s wife. They were the ones who increased ethnic hatred against the Tutsis. This played into a climate of fear and panic.<sup>34</sup> In the 1980s, Rwanda’s economy developed into one of the most stable economies in Africa.<sup>35</sup>

#### The Prelude to Genocide

At the end of the 1980s, the economic progress came to an end. A mix of food shortages and hunger, a high population density, a growing trade deficit and increasing corruption among the elite led to a high level of social unrest. Despite the lack of freedom of speech in Rwanda, Habyarimana was openly criticized. Under French pressure, Habyarimana was forced to introduce a multi-party system. From 1991, new Hutu parties competed with Habyarimana’s MDR for popular support.<sup>36</sup>

In 1987, the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) was formed by Rwandan Tutsi exiles in Uganda. Their goal was to overthrow Habyarimana’s government, as well as to clear the way for the return of Tutsi exiles from abroad. They called themselves *Inkotanyi*.<sup>37</sup> They launched a military invasion of Rwanda in 1990. The military conflict aggravated the economic crisis in Rwanda. The invasion also contributed to the growing climate of fear among Hutus, who were already afraid after genocidal massacres of Hutus in next-door Burundi by the Tutsi-dominated armed forces there.

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<sup>30</sup> Van Haperen, ‘The Rwandan Genocide, 1994’, 100.

<sup>31</sup> Caplan, ‘The 1994 Genocide of the Tutsi of Rwanda’, 449.

<sup>32</sup> Caplan, ‘The 1994 Genocide of the Tutsi of Rwanda’, 450.

<sup>33</sup> Van Haperen, ‘The Rwandan Genocide, 1994’, 101.

<sup>34</sup> Jones, *Genocide*, 476.

<sup>35</sup> Jones, *Genocide*, 476.

<sup>36</sup> Van Haperen, ‘The Rwandan Genocide, 1994’, 102.

<sup>37</sup> Van Haperen, ‘The Rwandan Genocide, 1994’, 102.

As a response to radical Hutu fighting nits, Habyarimana's party created its own paramilitary organization, the *Interahamwe*.<sup>38</sup>

### The Beginning

With these underlying factors, the tensions in the country were high. As will become clear in the next chapters, an incentive was needed to release the violence across the country. This incentive can be found in the shooting of the presidential aeroplane, when it approached Kigali airport at 8:30 pm on April 6, 1994. It carried President Habyarimana back from negotiation-talks in Tanzania. Two missiles were fired from the ground close to the airport. The plane caught fire immediately and, after an enormous explosion, landed in the grounds of the nearby President's palace. No one in the plane survived the crash.<sup>39</sup>

At 9:18 pm, the Presidential Guard had begun to erect roadblocks around Kigali. The following day, soldiers and militias began murdering thousands of Tutsis and oppositionist Hutu, working from carefully prepared lists. They combed through Kigali and other major cities. Tutsis were dragged out of houses and were murdered. At the infamous roadblocks, those carrying Tutsi identity cards (along with some Hutus who were deemed to "look" Tutsi) were shot or hacked to death with a machete.<sup>40</sup> When it became clear that there would not be outside obstruction, murder spread like a virus across the territories under *interahamwe* extremist control.<sup>41</sup> A week after the outbreak of violence in the capital, the massacres spread to rural areas.<sup>42</sup>

This chapter aimed to provide an overview of the evolution of ethnic identity in Rwanda. It shows that where ethnicity in precolonial times was not a fixed concept. Influenced by German and Belgian domination, the ethnic identities developed into a matter of life and death. Before the genocide, mass-violence against Tutsi had taken place. Although the shooting of the airplane is often seen as the start of the genocide, it does not explain the expeditious spreading of violence against Tutsi throughout the country. To understand the factors that were at play, the next chapter will theorize the link between ethnicity and violence.

## Chapter 2 – Theoretical Framework

As explained in the first chapter, the shift of ethnicity to a fixed, political category was a crucial factor behind the Rwandan genocide. In order to understand underlying factors to ethnic violence, this chapter will discuss central concepts that are related to how identity and ethnic violence are linked to each other. My thesis is built around two central concepts which form the building blocks for my theory: identity and violence. These can be linked to ethnic violence through the idea of *reification*. After

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<sup>38</sup> Jones, *Genocide*, 477.

<sup>39</sup> Van Haperen, 'The Rwandan Genocide, 1994', 110.

<sup>40</sup> Jones, *Genocide*, 479.

<sup>41</sup> Jones, *Genocide*, 481.

<sup>42</sup> Van Haperen, 'The Rwandan Genocide, 1994', 100.

these concepts have been clarified, the two theories around ethnic violence (elite/alliance) will be explained. As the use of *violent imaginaries* is important in the mobilization of perpetrators, this chapter will also provide a clarification of these. Overall, this chapter will explain the concepts in such a way that they contribute to the forging of a methodology that will be offered to properly understand the source.

### Social Identity

Identity is an often-used term that seems to have a straightforward meaning. However, the term is subject to haziness. What exactly does the concept entail? Who we are, or who we are seen to be, seems to matter in today's age. Identity is often seen as a way of classification or mapping of the human world.<sup>43</sup> Identity, in the easiest sense of the word, is the answer to the question: Who am I?<sup>44</sup> This question can be answered in two ways. First, the solitary form of identity is seen as a concept that contains the most individual sensation of a person's unique sense of self. Second, social identity entails a form of identity where the essence of personal self is held to be one's membership of a social category of group, and is formed when people share certain characteristics with others. These social identities are not static. Instead, they are multiple, changeable, and very much dependent on context.<sup>45</sup> Social identities are also relational: being Hutu inherently means you are not Tutsi.

### Ethnicity

Ethnic identity, or ethnicity, is a particular type of social category. We all see ourselves as part of an ethnic group like the Dutch, the Limburgers or the Frisians. The same applies to Hutu's and Tutsi's. These ethnic groups are large social formations based on the belief of shared culture and common ancestry.<sup>46</sup> There are two views on ethnicity: the primordialist view and the social constructivist view. Gerd Baumann, an anthropologist, explains these views on ethnicity using the metaphor of blood and wine. In short, from a primordialist approach, ethnicity, like blood, is a product of nature by itself. From a social constructivist view, ethnicity, like wine, is the product of people's actions and identifications.<sup>47</sup>

Early anthropologists who visited Rwanda followed the primordial view. By using a then popular pseudo-scientific method of taking nose and skull measurements, they determined whether one was a Hutu or a Tutsi.<sup>48</sup> This method relies on the idea that ethnicity is in fact embedded in physiognomic features, and thus 'given' by nature. This primordial view of ethnicity as a quality solely given by nature is dead among academics. But how did we come to the point that we see ethnicity as natural?

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<sup>43</sup> Richard Jenkins, *Social Identity*, (London & New York 2014) 6.

<sup>44</sup> Demmers, 'Identity, Boundaries and Violence', 21.

<sup>45</sup> Demmers, 'Identity, Boundaries and Violence', 23.

<sup>46</sup> Demmers, 'Identity, Boundaries and Violence', 26.

<sup>47</sup> Gerd Baumann, 'Ethnicity: Blood or Wine?', in *The Multicultural Riddle: Rethinking National, Ethnic and Religious Identities* (London and New York 1999) 63.

<sup>48</sup> Van Haperen, 'The Rwandan Genocide, 1994', 99-100.

There is a strong emotional aspect to believing ethnicity is natural given, as we are 'born into it' and it is family 'writ large'. Because people, NGOs and states still act upon these understandings of the self and the other, the primordialist view is still very much prevalent in public life.<sup>49</sup> As Chapter 3 will demonstrate, ordinary people often think of ethnicity mainly in a primordial way. So, although this approach is not academic, it still is an important factor to take into consideration.

A more accepted view on ethnicity among academics is social constructivism. This approach entails that ethnicity can be seen not as something fixed, but as the outcome of social interaction. Rogers Brubaker argues that what makes an ethnic identity 'ethnic', is to be found in the social process of maintaining boundaries that the people themselves recognize as ethnic. Historically, the division in boundaries between the people of Rwanda broke down according to their occupations: the Tutsi were largely cattle-herders, administrators, and soldiers; the Hutu were farmers; and the Twa (otherwise known as Pygmies, and the smallest population group in Rwanda) were foragers.<sup>50</sup> An example of how the ethnic group is a contextually fluctuating conceptual variable can be found in how ethnic groupness was indeed fluid in pre-colonial Rwanda.<sup>51</sup> As discussed in the first chapter, Hutu could "turn into" Tutsi by acquiring a lot of cattle, and by losing cattle, Tutsi degraded to Hutu.

Fredrik Barth builds upon the importance of these social boundaries. He found that neighboring ethnic groups showed as much overlap in "cultural stuff" as they showed variety within the boundaries.<sup>52</sup> When looking at Rwanda, this is certainly the case as Hutu and Tutsi share the same language, territory, and religion.<sup>53</sup> However, although two groups may seem culturally similar, they can distinguish themselves as ethnically very different.<sup>54</sup> This is where boundaries play an important role. In Rwanda, the most important boundary was ethnicity. The next paragraph about reification will discuss how ethnicity turns into something rigid.

#### Reification

I would argue that ethnicity is thus, like identity, better off to be seen as a process than as a static given. However, as mentioned before, a lot of institutions in our society treat ethnicity as something tangible. This "process during which a putative identity is turned into something hard, unchangeable and absolute", as Demmers clearly explains, "is called reification."<sup>55</sup> In the case of Rwanda, ethnicity was actively institutionalized and thus reified by the Belgian colonialists. By introducing mandatory identification cards that stated whether you belonged to either the Hutu's,

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<sup>49</sup> Demmers, 'Identity, Boundaries and Violence', 26.

<sup>50</sup> Totten, *We Cannot Forget*, 2.

<sup>51</sup> Rogers Brubaker, *Ethnicity Without Groups* (Cambridge 2004) 37.

<sup>52</sup> Demmers, 'Identity, Boundaries and Violence', 27.

<sup>53</sup> Jones, *Genocide*, 474.

<sup>54</sup> Baumann, 'Ethnicity: Blood or Wine?', 59.

<sup>55</sup> Demmers, 'Identity, Boundaries and Violence', 29.

Tutsi's or Twa's, your ethnicity started to matter.<sup>56</sup> This can be seen as the start of the process of reification of ethnic identity in Rwanda.



Image 2.1 Rwandan Identity Card<sup>57</sup>  
 Source: Genocide Archive Rwanda

Reification is a social process and as such it is central to the politics of ethnicity. In trying to understand the role of identity in conflict, analysts should carefully study the way in which social products such as ethnicity become cemented and 'thingified' during the course of war.<sup>58</sup> In Rwanda, the reification of ethnic identity turned out to be a matter of life and death.

### Ethnic Violence

Having laid the basis for the term of ethnicity, I will now reflect on the link between ethnicity and violence. Just as identity and ethnicity, the approach to ethnic violent conflict can be divided in two camps: the primordial and social constructivist approach. As reflected on before, the primordialist view on ethnicity is dead among academics. The same counts for the primordialist view on ethnic violent conflict. Still, I believe it is important to understand this principle since many people and instances *do* see ethnic conflict according to this view. The primordialist approach to ethnic conflict assumes that groups are essentially, and naturally, different. According to this

<sup>56</sup> Jones, *Genocide*, 475.

<sup>57</sup> Source:

[http://genocidearchiverwanda.org.rw/index.php/Rwanda National Identity Cards circa 1994 Gallery](http://genocidearchiverwanda.org.rw/index.php/Rwanda_National_Identity_Cards_circa_1994_Gallery), Rwanda National Identity Card circa 1994 N°6109.

<sup>58</sup> Demmers, 'Identity, Boundaries and Violence', 29.

approach, differences will inherently provoke inter-ethnic clashes and violence. In some cases, this approach argues, ethnicity simply breeds violence.<sup>59</sup>

The other camp supports the social constructivist approach. This camp sees ethnic violent conflict not as natural given, but as a social construct. There are two theories to the social constructivist approach on ethnic violent conflict that I would like to highlight: the elite and the alliance theory.<sup>60</sup> These theories will be clarified one by one in this chapter, after which I will offer a methodology that will be applied to the source in Chapter 3.

#### Elite Theory

The elite theory departs from the idea that ethnic war is not something that just happens, but as something that has been carefully orchestrated by elites and organizations. The underlying thought of elite theories of violent war is that ethnic war is functional. The general focus on the role of violence is on how it is "... strategically instigated to create or affirm boundaries between groups of people".<sup>61</sup> Elite theories of conflict thus take a rational actor approach. The source of ethnic conflict is placed at the level of the elite rationally pursuing their own interest. Agency is hereby solely placed at the level of elites, while the masses are seen as followers, who internalize dominant discourses and orders. They are passively subjected to the propaganda and manipulations of elites and rulers.<sup>62</sup>

In sum, elite theories of conflict see ethnic wars as top-down and elite-driven struggles for power with followers seen as obedient, agency-lacking people.<sup>63</sup> Here, ethnic violence is seen as a political strategy to create, increase or maintain group boundaries and political support. In this sense, they stand in direct opposition to commonsensical primordialism, in arguing that ethnic 'groupness' is the *result* of violence, not the *cause*.

#### Alliance Theory

Africa specialist Mahmood Mamdani argues that: "... had the killing been the work of state functionaries and those bribed by them, it would have translated in no more than a string of massacres perpetrated by death squads. Without massacres by machete-wielding civilian mobs, in the hundreds and thousands, there would have been no genocide".<sup>64</sup> According to him, top-down coercion does not entirely explain the enormous spread of violence across the population. An answer to the deficiency of the elite theory can be found in another social constructivist approach towards ethnic violent conflict: the alliance theory. Where elite theorists place the locus of agency mostly at the top of society, Kalyvas argues that agency is at least as likely to be at the

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<sup>59</sup> Demmers, 'Identity, Boundaries and Violence', 27.

<sup>60</sup> Demmers, 'Identity, Boundaries and Violence', 28.

<sup>61</sup> Demmers, 'Identity, Boundaries and Violence', 30.

<sup>62</sup> Demmers, 'Identity, Boundaries and Violence', 30.

<sup>63</sup> Demmers, 'Identity, Boundaries and Violence', 31.

<sup>64</sup> Jones, *Genocide*, 485.

bottom of society.<sup>65</sup> He argues that: “Civilians cannot be treated as passive, manipulated, or invisible actors; indeed, they often manipulate central actors to settle their own conflicts”.<sup>66</sup> He contends that violence in civil war is multifunctional and only possible through alliances between groups and factions at different levels of society. Local actors often pursue their own agendas under the heading of a “master cleavage” (such as ethnic war), both private and political. It is the convergence of local motives and supra-local imperatives that “... endows civil war with its particular character and leads to joint violence that straddles the divide between the political and the private, the collective and the individual.”<sup>67</sup>

Keen also recognizes multiple functions served by violence in settings of war and disaster. He suggests investigating war and disaster as alternative systems of profit, power and protection.<sup>68</sup> He goes as far as to argue that: “...events, however, horrible and catastrophic, are actually *produced*, they are made to happen by a diverse and complicated set of actors who may well be achieving their objectives in the midst of what looks like failure and breakdown.”<sup>69</sup>

So, both Keen and Kalyvas support an approach that ethnic violent conflict not as carried out from the central level, but as negotiated. The elite and alliance theory have in common that they see ethnic violent conflict as something that is used by actors (either at the top or at the bottom of society) to pursue own goals. Both theories discard the primordialist view that ethnic violent conflict is bound to happen.

#### *Violent imaginaries*

Next to the abovementioned theories concerning ethnic violent conflict, there is another important aspect to the emergence of violence that is worth mentioning. As Apter says: “People do not commit political violence without discourse. They need to talk themselves into it”.<sup>70</sup> Violence is made as the legitimate course of action through the imagining of violent scenarios from the past and their social representation. Thus, war is a social institution that is reproduced through discourses, which confer legitimacy on it.<sup>71</sup> Schröder and Schmidt translate the abovementioned idea into violent imaginaries, where “... violence needs to be imagined in order to be carried out”.<sup>72</sup> This implementation of violent discourse can be found at both the elite and the alliance level and can take several forms:

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<sup>65</sup> Demmers, ‘Identity, Boundaries and Violence’, 31.

<sup>66</sup> Stathis Kalyvas, ‘The Ontology of “Political Violence”: Action and Identity in Civil Wars’ *Perspectives on Politics*, 1(3) (2003), 481.

<sup>67</sup> Demmers, ‘Identity, Boundaries and Violence’, 32.

<sup>68</sup> Demmers, ‘Identity, Boundaries and Violence’, 32.

<sup>69</sup> Demmers, ‘Identity, Boundaries and Violence’, 32.

<sup>70</sup> David E. Apter, *The Legitimization of Violence*, (New York 1997), 2.

<sup>71</sup> Jolle Demmers, ‘Telling each other apart: A discursive approach to violent conflict’, in Demmers, J.: *Theories of Violent Conflict*, (New York and London, 2012), 118.

<sup>72</sup> Ingo W. Schröder and Bettina E. Schmidt, ‘Introduction: Violent imaginaries and violent practices’, *Anthropology of Violence and Conflict*, (London and New York, 2001) 1-24, 9.

1. a narrative form: these keep the memory of former conflicts and past violence alive in stories, either by glorifying one's own group's achievements and benefits or by the perceived injustices, losses or suffering incurred by one's own group
2. a performative form: performative representations of violent confrontations are public rituals in which antagonistic relationships are staged and prototypical images of violence enacted
3. an inscriptive form: violent imaginaries can also be inscribed in the cultural landscape as images displayed on banners or murals<sup>73</sup>

The particular symbolism of these imaginaries often contains (a combination of) the following characteristic elements, according to Schröder and Schmidt<sup>74</sup>:

- a strictly polarized structure of "we:they" that no individual can escape and leaves no room for ambiguity
- the application of the principle of totality to all aspects of this dichotomy: any action or expression by the other party of the confrontational relationship is taken to be a threat or aggressive act that calls for defensive action
- the identification of 'our' side with the survival and well-being of every single individual: the struggle is of vital importance for the life of the group of and the lives of each of its members
- the moral superiority of 'our' cause is not affected by the outcome of the struggle
- post-war society is portrayed in dire terms: there can only be complete victory or total defeat

Although I believe this list is already quite extensive, I would propose to add to the first point the use of dehumanizing language that could be used to enlarge the gap between "we:they". Furthermore, it is crucial to note that these imaginaries require human agency to turn into violent practices.<sup>75</sup> These violent imaginaries can be traced back to as well the elite-level who spread violent imaginaries through mass-media to mobilize followers, as to the grass-root level where violent discourse is internalized through these imaginaries in order to ease the killing.

#### Methodology

A discursive analysis of the interviews of the *génocidaires* allows me to recognize if the ethnic violent conflict in Rwanda can be best described as a result of coercion orchestrated by the elite, or a means as a means of acquiring personal gains for the perpetrators. The discursive method entails, in this case, that not the individual experience is taken as the principle unit of analysis. Instead, it strives to recognize

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<sup>73</sup> Schröder and Schmidt, 'Introduction: Violent Imaginaries and Violent Practices', 10.

<sup>74</sup> Schröder and Schmidt, 'Introduction: Violent Imaginaries and Violent Practices', 10-11.

<sup>75</sup> Schröder and Schmidt, 'Introduction: Violent Imaginaries and Violent Practices', 11.

regularities in the accounts of the perpetrators.<sup>76</sup> This methodology requires crystallization by determination of characteristics of the two theories.

For the elite theory, use of language that implies coercion like “we were forced to”, “coordination by a certain official”, or “a high level of top-down orchestration” are significant for the elite theory. In the elite theory, the masses are seen as passive receivers who internalize dominant discourses and orders, with little room for autonomous agency.<sup>77</sup> As mentioned before, these dominant discourses are partially formed by the use of violent imaginaries. Therefore, I will pay attention to the perception of these elite-formed violent imaginaries by the perpetrators.

The alliance theory, on the other end of the spectrum, argues that perpetrators have agency of their own. Signs that indicate the alliance theory are the mentioning of personal gains perpetrators may have had to engage in the genocide. Formulations that mention the opportunity to gain material wealth and forms of social pressure are examples would confirm the alliance theory. For instance, “killing as a source of income”, “own comfort above accomplishments in the marshes” and “everyone supported these profitable killings” are verbalizations that coincide with the alliance theory. When looking at the interviews, it becomes apparent that the use of violent imaginaries is not reserved to the elite. Therefore, I will also address the way in which these violent imaginaries are used at the grassroot-level.

### Chapter 3 – Discursive Analysis of the Source

In order to analyze how these two theories on ethnic violent conflict relate to each other in practice, I have applied the methodology offered in Chapter 2 to a bundle of interviews with *génocidaires* of the Rwandan genocide. The author, Jean Hatzfeld, was the first to ask those responsible to explain *why* they pursued the genocide. This gives a unique insight into the discourse employed by the ordinary participants of the genocide. The interviewees consist out of a group of ten people, most of them farmers, who lived in the hills around the town of Nyamata and were already close friends before the killing started. Hatzfeld visited them in the penitentiary of Rilima in 2001 and 2002.<sup>78</sup>

The book is structured around thematic questions Hatzfeld posed to the interviewees like “the first time”, “life after genocide”, and “Gods role in all this”. This makes the interviews semi-structured in nature, leaving enough room for the interviewees to answer in their own way, while remaining enough structure for comparison. The chapters in the book are divided per theme, and each chapter contains the story of different perpetrators. This suggests a group-interview, while in fact the interviews were taken in a one-on-one setting. Hatzfeld selected the group not on basis of gender, age, education or other classifications. He argues that in case of

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<sup>76</sup> Sanna Talja, “Analyzing Qualitative Interview Data: The Discourse Analytic Method”, *Library & Information Science Research* (21) (1999) 459.

<sup>77</sup> Demmers, ‘Identity, Boundaries and Violence’, 30-31.

<sup>78</sup> Hatzfeld, *Machete Season*, 5-12.

genocide, these traits become irrelevant. Instead, he addressed a group of prisoners who would feel protected by their friendship. This group identity strengthened during the genocide. They formed a group of friends because of the proximity of their fields.<sup>79</sup>

Although the book gives a distinctive view of how the genocide was perceived by perpetrators of the genocide, it does not provide a conclusive idea on where agency in this genocide can best be placed. As the normality of the group of perpetrators stands in stark contrast with the abnormality of genocide, I would argue that these interviews are highly interesting for analysis through application of abovementioned theories. This thesis will proceed by first discussing traits of the elite theory that can be found in the interviews. Then, features that coincide with the alliance theory will be presented. As mentioned before, the use of violent imaginaries plays an important role in the realization of violence. These imaginaries are to be found in application of both theories, therefore, at the end of each part, these will be highlighted.

### Elite Theory

One of the most important features of the elite theory is that the locus of agency is put solely at the elite level, while the ordinary people are seen as blind followers. Four distinctive traits that coincide with the elite theory can be found in the interviews. The first factor is the highly developed top-down orchestration. The second factor is the large level of obedience. The third factor is the straightforward order that needed to be followed. Lastly, I will discuss perpetrator-perception of the use of violent imaginaries by the elite.

The first factor that can be found in the interviews that relates to the elite theory is the highly developed top-down orchestration. There are multiple examples to be found in the interviews that underline this. One of the perpetrators commented on the way things went after the shooting of the president's plane: "I think the genocide was organized down to the last detail by intimidators in Kigali".<sup>80</sup> With regard to the organizational aspect, another perpetrator comments that: "In the beginning, the burgomaster, subprefect, the municipal councilors along with the soldiers and retired policemen were the coordinators of the attacks."<sup>81</sup> An important, leading role in this top-down orchestration was reserved for the *interahamwe*, a Hutu extremist militia: "... there were *interahamwe* to guide them [new killers] in their first steps. ... They were more skilled, more impassive. They gave advice on what paths to take and which blows to use. They used their spare time to initiate those who seemed uneasy with this work of killing."<sup>82</sup> These quotes all complement the idea of a strongly built organization, and imply a solid top-down composition.

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<sup>79</sup> Jean Hatzfeld, *Machete Season: The Killers in Rwanda Speak*, (New York 2005) 44.

<sup>80</sup> Hatzfeld, *Machete Season*, 176.

<sup>81</sup> Hatzfeld, *Machete Season*, 11.

<sup>82</sup> Hatzfeld, *Machete Season*, 36.

The second factor involves a large level of obedience. An example of this can be found in the following quote: “We didn’t care one way or the other who preferred to take his orders from the burgomaster, the *interahamwe*, or our well-known municipal judge. We obeyed on all sides, and we found satisfaction in that”.<sup>83</sup> The perpetrators stressed: “... if you must obey the orders of the authorities, ..., if you see that the killing will be total and without disastrous consequences for yourself, you feel soothed and reassured”.<sup>84</sup> What can be concluded from these fragments is that not only were the perpetrators well-prepared by the authorities, they themselves also place the locus of agency at the elite level to relieve themselves from feeling guilt. The perpetrators thus consented to the orders from above.

A third factor can be found in the straightforward order that needed to be followed by the perpetrators. The killers were told a clear plan: “There is no need to ask how to begin. The only worthwhile plan is to start straight ahead in the bush, and right now, without hanging back anymore behind questions”.<sup>85</sup> Another perpetrator was told a similar message: “... the judge announced that the reason for the meeting was the killing of every Tutsi without exception. It was simply said, and it was simply to understand”.<sup>86</sup> From an elite perspective, and considering the exceptional level of participation in the killing, I would argue that the masses internalized the elite discourse on ethnicity. But what exactly did this discourse entail?

How crucial the use of violent discourse by the elite becomes clear when analyzing the interviews. Therefore, I will lastly focus on the use of violent imaginaries by the elite. As one perpetrator says: “When you have been prepared the right way by the radios and official advice, you obey more easily, even if the order is to kill your neighbours. ... when he shows you that the act will be total and have no grave consequences, you obey more easily”.<sup>87</sup> Another perpetrator states that: “The platforms of all the Hutu political parties had been proposing Tutsi killings since 1992. ... They were read over the radio. Everyone could easily learn about them and understand them”.<sup>88</sup> Other means of spreading violent imaginaries by the elite consisted out of “... army newspapers [that] singled out the Tutsi as the Hutu’s natural enemy who had to be definitively destroyed”.<sup>89</sup> This led to the perpetrators internalizing the elite-discourse of how “they [Tutsi’s] had become a threat greater than all we had experienced together, more important than our way of seeing things in the community”.<sup>90</sup> It becomes clear that use of mass-media by the elite like radio and newspapers played a big role in the mobilization of the perpetrators, which is a

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<sup>83</sup> Hatzfeld, *Machete Season*, 15.

<sup>84</sup> Hatzfeld, *Machete Season*, 48.

<sup>85</sup> Hatzfeld, *Machete Season*, 15.

<sup>86</sup> Hatzfeld, *Machete Season*, 11.

<sup>87</sup> Hatzfeld, *Machete Season*, 71.

<sup>88</sup> Hatzfeld, *Machete Season*, 177.

<sup>89</sup> Hatzfeld, *Machete Season*, 178-189.

<sup>90</sup> Hatzfeld, *Machete Season*, 120.

characteristic trait of violent imaginaries, alongside of the clear division between 'we:they' and the importance of total defeat of a natural enemy.

### Alliance Theory

At the other side of the spectrum, the alliance theory discards the passiveness of the perpetrators. Instead, it argues that rather than top-down coercion, the reason behind participation in ethnic violent conflict can be found in the perception of violence as a system for personal profit, power, and protection. The first recurrent trait that supports the alliance theory that will be discussed is the high level of material reward of killing and looting compared to farming. The second factor concerns a discrepancy in ideological motivation between the elite and the mass level. The third factor I deducted is the relation between material gains and social incentive to carry out the killing. Lastly, I will pay attention to the use of violent imaginaries at the mass-level.

The first reappearing incentive to killing in the testimonies of the perpetrators is the high amount of material reward connected to participation in killing. An important feature of this group of perpetrators to keep in mind is that they were merely poor cultivators of land. One perpetrator explains that: "During the killings, anyone with strong arms brought home as much as a merchant of quality. We could no longer count the panels of sheet metal we were piling up".<sup>91</sup> Another perpetrator clarifies the acquiring of material gains as: "We got up rich, went to bed with full bellies, we lived a life of plenty. Pillaging is more worthwhile than harvesting, because it profits everyone equally."<sup>92</sup> The killing is overall described as: "... less wearisome than farming".<sup>93</sup> It appears that there was an abundance of material motivation for the perpetrators to participate in the killing.

The second factor that supports the alliance theory that can be found in the interviews is the discrepancy in ideological motivation between the elite and the mass level. One of the perpetrators declared that: "At bottom, we didn't care about what we accomplished in the marshes, only about what was important to us for our comfort: the stocks of sheet metal, the rounded-up cows, the piles of windows and other such goods."<sup>94</sup> Another perpetrator builds on this idea: "Basically, we didn't give a hoot what they were scheming up in Kigali. We paid no more attention to the events in the country, as long as we knew the killing was continuing everywhere without a snag".<sup>95</sup> This suggests that it was not as much the top-down coercion or the elite goal that had to be fulfilled, as the opportunity to easily gain more wealth that motivated the perpetrators. Overall, participating in the killing can be seen as a means of living that was more lucrative than their ordinary occupation.

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<sup>91</sup> Hatzfeld, *Machete Season*, 64.

<sup>92</sup> Hatzfeld, *Machete Season*, 64.

<sup>93</sup> Hatzfeld, *Machete Season*, 62.

<sup>94</sup> Hatzfeld, *Machete Season*, 83.

<sup>95</sup> Hatzfeld, *Machete Season*, 95.

A third factor that supports the alliance theory that surfaces from the interviews concerns the relation between an increase in material gains and social incentive. It became important for the killers to bring lootings along: “If you went home empty-handed, you might even be scolded by your wife and children”.<sup>96</sup> That was because the material gains contributed to a social stimulus to motivate the perpetrators:

“In the evening, families listened to music, folk dances, Rwandan or Burundian music. Thanks to the many stolen audiocassettes, families in every house could enjoy music. They all felt equally richer, without jealousy or backbiting, and they congratulated themselves. The men sang, everyone drank, the women changed dresses three times in an evening. It was noisier than weddings, it was drunken reveling every day”.<sup>97</sup>

So, there was a great festive aspect to the evenings where, after the men came back from killing and looting, everyone would celebrate, eat, drink and have fun. The looting provided this festive character of the evenings, which in turn contributed to the continuation of the violence.

As mentioned earlier, the use of violent imaginaries also played a big role at the grassroot-level. Therefore, I will lastly pay attention to the use of violent imaginaries by perpetrators. The biggest example can be found in the use of dehumanizing language: “It is more tempting to kill a trembling and bleating goat than a spirited and frisky one”.<sup>98</sup> Another example is the terminology to refer to Tutsi: “Before the killings we usually called them cockroaches. But during, it was more suitable to call them snakes, because of their attitude, or zeros, or dogs, because in our country we don’t like dogs; in any case, they were less-than-nothings”.<sup>99</sup> Thus, the killers felt more comfortable insulting and hitting ‘animals’ than proper people.<sup>100</sup> A more performative form of a violent imaginary can be found in how killers sometimes brought a Tutsi back to the village. They would gather all women and children to see an upcoming show: “The killers would cut off the victims’ limbs, they would crush their bones with a club, but without killing them ... They wanted the audience to learn from these torments”.<sup>101</sup> This sent a message. The performativity of violence is important, as violence without an audience will still leave people dead, but is socially meaningless.<sup>102</sup>

#### Purely Alliance?

Although these material gains and social pressure are an important contributing factor to engaging in the killings, the elite-theory is intertwined with this argument as the

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<sup>96</sup> Hatzfeld, *Machete Season*, 38.

<sup>97</sup> Hatzfeld, *Machete Season*, 95.

<sup>98</sup> Hatzfeld, *Machete Season*, 38.

<sup>99</sup> Hatzfeld, *Machete Season*, 132.

<sup>100</sup> Hatzfeld, *Machete Season*, 132.

<sup>101</sup> Hatzfeld, *Machete Season*, 133.

<sup>102</sup> Schröder and Schmidt, ‘Introduction: Violent Imaginaries and Violent Practices’, 5-6.

organizers arranged patrols, settled disputes over looting and laid out the daily itineraries. If these organizers had not been there, it would probably not have occurred to the farmers to begin the genocide. They, themselves, argue that the decision to kill was from the organizers.<sup>103</sup> However, this does not mean that the possibility of material gain was no extra incentive for perpetrators to get motivated to participate in the killing.

## Conclusion

I have researched if the Rwandan genocide can best be explained through either the elite or the alliance theory, based on testimonies of a group of perpetrators. With regard to the elite theory, I would argue that people are definitely not just blind followers. However, the fact that people are no mere followers does not entirely discard top-down orchestration. The elite-level provided the perpetrators with the opportunity to loot: this reinforces the elite theory. It is clear that hundreds of thousands of Hutus participated eagerly in the killing. Many were motivated by greed - the chance to loot Tutsi belongings and Tutsi land. This confirms the alliance theory. I would argue that the two theories are no mere alternatives for each other. The one does not exclude the other, and they can be seen as mutually reinforcing. Within the spectrum of ethnic violent conflict, the use of violent imaginaries is crucial.

The method I have used was based on discursive analysis. Building on perpetrator testimonies, I was able to mark to what extent they experienced the locus of agency at the top or bottom of society. I want to emphasize that the outcome of my analysis is based on a very narrow research, having only based on the testimonies of one small group of perpetrators in the rural area of Nyamata, Rwanda. In the cities, the genocide had different characteristics. This, thus, gives limited insight in what happened at the elite level, but only in the way in which the elite level actions were experienced by these perpetrators. With my thesis, I have attempted to provide an overview of how the elite and alliance theory relate to each other in practice in this particular case study, combining and adding to the existing literature on the topic so far.

In order to create a more wholesome research, it would be useful to compare this region with different regions, for example a city to see to what extent similarities are to be found. Furthermore, an analysis of official documents would be useful to investigate to what extent the experienced top-down orchestration complied with the elite-plan. During my research, I stumbled upon legion of other interesting angles in which following research could be undertaken. As the use of violent imaginaries with regard to ethnicity have proven to be of crucial importance in the manifestation of the violence, an interesting follow-up research would be the analysis of “peaceful imaginaries” in post-genocidal Rwanda. A new approach to ethnicity had to be

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<sup>103</sup> Hatzfeld, *Machete Season*, 182.

formed. Are there “peaceful imaginaries” that can be identified that can be seen as having contributed to this putative new form of post-genocidal identity?

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