

Obedience troubled?

Exploring meanings of obedience in the post-genocide Rwanda

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Abstract

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This thesis explores meanings of obedience in and outside the genocide context among different groups of people in Rwanda. The 1994 genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda involved an important number of perpetrators and this has brought people to wonder why and how such massive participation was possible. Answers to this question include obedience as one of the factors that motivated the perpetrators and some scholars have portrayed Rwanda as an obedient society. However, while the role of obedience in genocide is debated, the scholarship is characterized by several limitations. In addition to a failure to define what is meant by obedience, most research on obedience in Rwanda is conducted by outsiders and few – if any – query how Rwandans make sense of and position themselves in relation to obedience and to the role it has played in the 1994 genocide.

The present thesis is therefore an attempt to fill this gap in the literature. It is based on discourse analysis of narratives collected from 43 in-depth interviews. The respondents were selected from “ordinary Rwandans” of different backgrounds, including, among others, genocide perpetrators. The thesis addresses two main questions: (1) how is obedience imbued with meaning, in general and in relation to the genocide? (2) Does the genocide appear to have shaped and troubled meanings of obedience, and if so, in what ways?

One of the most important findings of this study points to the celebration of obedience among the respondents, which can be seen as reflecting the great stake that obedience appears to have in people’s life. Thus, even when the 1994 genocide appears to have troubled its meanings, some strategies seem to be at play in order to save or even heal obedience from any damage. These strategies include the denial of the role of obedience in the genocide, the idealisation of obedience and its renaming.

This study contributes to the existing literature on obedience by bringing about another representation of obedience in Rwanda, which is neither unconditional nor blind. More generally, the study highlights how obedience is not a fixed, clear-cut concept, but a multifaceted concept, whose meanings vary according to the context that is referred to. Recognizing this might further enhance the efforts to understand the role of obedience in genocide and in mass atrocities in general.

Keywords: obedience, authority, Rwanda, genocide, discourse, meaning