

Universities in Times of National Crisis: The Cases of Rwanda and Burundi

Bruce Janz

(in Malinda Smith, ed. *Globalizing Africa*. Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 2003: 465-482.)

Introduction

The pressure to participate in the global community has as one of its manifestations the requirements of an adequate and even a “world class” university system. Historically, universities have had more in common with monasteries than with marketplaces. Universities were always places of retreat, drawing people apart from the world for the purpose of contemplation and self-improvement. At its worst, the focussed vocation of the monastery gives way to the irrelevance of the ivory tower. Indeed, the most common critique of the university, and particularly the liberal arts, is that it does not contribute to the real needs or wants of people. Many believe that the governing metaphor should be changed from monastery to marketplace. Needless to say, this change comes with its own set of problems and, for many, a university which is primarily a marketplace is no longer a university. Nevertheless, in the minds of many, tensions between integrity and relevance are the core problems facing the university today.

In a country undergoing the stress of war or ethnic strife, this tension between integrity and relevance is all the more acute. In countries such as Rwanda and Burundi, where there is serious ethnic strife, relevance takes on the urgency of a life or death situation. And so, the monastery metaphor becomes all the more suspect, as the stakes are higher. The answer in many cases has been the marketplace metaphor. If only the university could contribute to the material and economic wealth of the country, if only it could help in raising the general standard of living, the national pressures would dissipate. When the marketplace metaphor is used in North

America, it implies that the university's task is to provide the expertise to raise the general standard of living and create jobs. In a country burdened with a serious crisis, the metaphor used points to the task of solving the pressing problems that created the crisis, and preventing the crisis from happening again.

In both Rwanda and Burundi, issues such as these are of central importance. Both countries have borne great suffering in recent years. The human tragedy of 1994, with body counts as high as 850,000 is Rwanda's recent legacy.¹ In the case of Burundi, there has been long-standing guerilla warfare, particularly since the democratically elected government President Sylvestre Ntibantunganya was overthrown in a coup d'état on July 25 1996, and replaced by the military government of Major Pierre Buyoya. Both countries endure regular ambushes and police actions, and in both countries there are areas which are extremely volatile.

Such times raise serious questions for the university. Is this an institution that can only exist, and can only have relevance, in a society that is stable and relatively safe? Given that the institution already exists in both Rwanda and Burundi, how might a real university exist in these conditions, and not simply a group of buildings in which some pale simulacrum of a university holds classes and hands out degrees?

Answers to these questions will not be found in most writing on the nature of the university. Books and papers on the liberal arts and university affairs in general are overwhelmingly based on North American (and some European) experience, which has a very definite character. Unrest, for example, is put in terms of individual deviance from generally accepted laws. Cultural conflict is often reduced to identity politics. Peace is assumed to be the default condition. Democracy of some sort is assumed to be the political system in which the university

operates. The dominance of science as a mode of knowing is accepted virtually without question. Relative moral, political, and scientific superiority to the rest of the world is a given. And, even when there is some attempt to think about the state of the university in other cultures, it is almost always put in terms of “inter-cultural dialogue,” which assumes that the significance of those universities begins and ends with their relationship to universities in North America or Europe.

These conditions result in certain kinds of Western defences of the university, and of liberal education in particular, which may not be particularly relevant to universities outside of North America, and especially those in situations of national crisis. Two of these defences I will call traditionalist and progressivist. The traditionalist sees the university as guaranteeing the continuity of the most cherished values of society while giving the foundation for something like English philosopher John Stuart Mill’s marketplace of ideas. We hold on to what is best from the past, and through the rational process of debate we build the future. The crisis of the university, then, is put in terms of a loss of either the cherished ideas or the diluting of the possibility of rational conversation. It should be noted that there is a progressivist element in the traditionalist defence – the recovery and maintenance of tradition allows the possibility for development and building on that tradition.

The progressivist defence, on the other hand, argues that the university is the best tool for changing society for the better. This might be accomplished by linking research to private enterprise, giving us the ability to tailor the university to the most pressing of public (or even consumer) needs. Or, it might be accomplished by critiquing the structures of power in society, the assumed dominance and rightness of governmental, institutional, or personal reality. In either of these versions of progressivism, the metaphor of the tool is most apt. The only difference is

the definition of the problem. As with the traditionalist position, there is a sense of tradition implicit in the progressivist defence, in that our current state, and the future better state, must presuppose an earlier, less perfect version of the world from which we could learn.

Both the traditionalist and the progressivist defence assume the existence of a stable society. In the first case, stability not only provides the basis of tradition, but also gives the space for rational discourse to be able to analyse that tradition. In the second case, society must be sufficiently stable to allow the tool to work. This tool only makes sense when there is a society that takes it seriously, which has a sufficient level of security to be able to make use of its resources. Both versions of the progressivist defence require a definition of the problem, to which the tool is the answer, which is held against the backdrop of relative safety. It makes no sense to try to link research to private enterprise to meet the needs of the people, when the needs of the people are not consumer needs. It makes no sense to critique the structures of power when those structures are already under attack from rebels, or are in a tenuous position for some other reason.

There are, of course, Herculean efforts to reproduce the university in these places. The United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), for example, has an extensive program of aid to African universities, designed to assist in “capacity-building,” or establishing the infrastructure of expertise in specific countries. Other non-governmental organizations (NGOs) focus on higher education, north-south cooperation in education, pedagogy, and so forth. These efforts could be thought of as tool-producing activity – if knowledge is the solution to human problems, and if foreign knowledge has been shown to be inadequate due to an insufficient understanding of local conditions, then the national or local

universities must step in as the primary vehicle for building capacity in a certain place. However, that local responsibility is assumed to be an intermediate tool, not unlike the colonial policies of indirect rule, in which local universities take over the control of education, but always with an eye to “fitting in” to the strictures of foreign economic requirements. Who defines what counts as capacity? What happens when local needs come in conflict with foreign pressures? That cynicism aside, it might also be noted that capacity building is a metaphor that seems to imply a steady progress in conditions of relative calm. This is long-term development with the goals of solving intractable social problems and providing the basis for growth. It requires national stability, cooperation with the government, and the trust of the society.

So, capacity building at worst may be a tool of indirect rule, and at best may be a tool for ameliorating conditions in society. But what if the conditions for the use of the tool – stability, cooperation, trust from society – are not there? Does the university still have a place? Most critiques of the university assume that the university exists in certain social conditions, such as peace. What if that is not true? What if the university is in a society that is under great stress? The question before us comes in three parts: (1) How have the universities in Rwanda and Burundi responded to the societal unrest? (2) What, if any, is the role of a university in places as volatile as these? (3) What does this say about the nature of the university in general?

The Cases of Rwanda and Burundi

Université Nationale du Rwanda

The Université Nationale du Rwanda (UNR) was started by Catholic missionaries, and has been supported since the 60s by, among others, Quebec universities. Before the genocide of 1994, it had campuses in Butare, Kigali, and Ruhengeri. Most of the faculties were in the southern town of Butare. The arts and social sciences were in Ruhengeri, and the law faculty was in the capital, Kigali. This was a political decision as much as anything – Ruhengeri was the home of the president, and a centre of Hutu affairs. Butare, in the south, was seen as more liberal, and more Tutsi.

The vice-rector academic of UNR, Dr. Jean Bosco Butera, suggested that the university had at least an indirect part to play in the genocide.² The university had emphasized technical training to the exclusion of all else. It had taught everyone to be efficient, and so when it came to killing, they all killed efficiently. Now, he said, what was needed was “humanistic” education, which would enable the people to find new ways to think through the state of the country. And, even if the university had not directly fanned the flames of racism (although some members of the university community were certainly accused genocide perpetrators), this does not mean it bears no responsibility for failing to address racism. One can imagine, in a society like pre-genocide Rwanda, where the government at best turned a blind eye to racism, and at worst contributed to it through the issuing of identity cards that carried ethnic affiliation, that any attack on racism by the university could be regarded as an attack on the government. So, the university had many reasons to train technically proficient, but socially, ethically, and politically ignorant people, and it had few reasons to resist this tendency.

The university, then, had been a witting or unwitting tool of a racist regime. Butera’s comments seemed to indicate that the place of the university in the new post-genocide society

was to contribute to the foundation of civil conversation within society. The revamped priorities of the university reflect this. A top priority was the training of teachers and lawyers – the teachers, to be able to affect the new generation before they reach university, and the lawyers, to be able to get the justice system back on its feet. Another important change involved language – with the influx of Uganda-born Rwandans (mainly Tutsi), whose second language is often English instead of French, the university decided to require that all incoming students spend the first year studying the European language they had not grown up with. Before the genocide, everyone spoke both Kinyarwanda and French; the introduction of English on a large scale and its identity with Ugandan-raised Tutsis means that there is yet another reason for tension. It was hoped that, after language training, students would be able to take classes in either French or English, and that this would nullify any problems that separate languages might create.

Those involved in the university are under no illusions about the immediate success of these changes. Butera, when asked whether he thought the language measures would solve anything, indicated that it might be too little, but that something had to be done.³ The policy concerning first-year language instruction was suggested to the government by the university, and came back from the government as a much more wide-ranging directive.

The university reopened after the genocide in 1995, with all faculties located in Butare. The Ruhengeri campus had previously housed the arts and social science faculties, but that campus was almost completely destroyed during the genocide, while the physical plant of the Butare campus remained relatively intact. The Ruhengeri campus always had been seen as a concession to northern Hutus, not to mention a plum given to the president's home region. But that campus was always seen in the south as something of an embarrassment, as not measuring

up to the standards of the rest of the university. There were good reasons for the recentralization of the university: The northern campus was in very bad shape, the north was the stronghold of radicalism, and it made more sense to reconstruct the university as a whole, rather than as scattered entities. The university's understanding of itself in this nation in crisis was that it must be centralized, and centralized away from the area of most extreme thought. The Kigali law faculty was also brought into Butare, mostly because of damage to the infrastructure.

Immediately after the genocide and until early 1997, the university was in a kind of holding pattern, simply trying to stay alive. In 1997, however, with the assumption of a new rector, it underwent a large-scale program of reflection and self-critique to determine what was needed in the new society. The major meeting to discuss this was held in July 1997, and the major decisions which came out of that meeting reflect the earlier priorities: (1) That the university contributes to peace by promoting bilingual education; (2) That all arts and social science students, besides learning their areas, also take classes in pedagogy, so that they can contribute to primary education in the country; and (3) That the system reflects a more North American model: i.e., three year baccalaureate, two year Masters, PhD in most areas; and in the medical school, BSc plus four years of medical school.⁴

It should be noted that Rwandans were relatively well educated before the genocide. The bureaucracy was highly developed, and the economy, at least through the 80's showed slow but steady growth. It was still a poor country, but it was a comparatively well run country.⁵ One might understand the rebuilding of the university infrastructure as an attempt to recapture the efficiency of the past. And, of course, that past came with political and ethnic suspicion and propaganda. Even "humanistic" education may be a tool, and the question always remains – who

is using the tool? Who defined the problem for which the tool is an answer? What are the unintended consequences of using the tool? On the other hand, one might read these initiatives as an effort to avoid blaming the problems on ethnicity, and instead focus on the skills and tools needed for anyone to live together in peace.

Université du Burundi

The Université du Burundi is trying as much as possible to continue as a normally functioning institution in a society that has factional violence. This is the university which provided most of the lecturers to Rwanda in 1995, after so many had been killed or imprisoned during the Rwandan genocide. This university maintained many links to universities all over Africa and the rest of the world, until the time of the embargo.⁶

Whether the strife in Burundi is defined in ethnic or political terms, it does mean that the university sees itself as having a responsibility for contributing to the solution by working on peace and justice issues both inside and outside of the university community. In a brief designed to generate support among universities for lifting the embargo on Burundi, presented at the AIPU conference in February 1997 in Egypt⁷, the authors emphasized the measures that have been taken to ensure stability and reasonable discussion concerning societal problems. The report suggests a number of ways in which a culture of peace could be fostered, with the aid of the university:

1. *The promotion of a culture of peace and human rights*: This is accomplished with the aid of UNESCO and UNICEF, and involves holding seminars for the faculty and students on various issues relevant to peace and human rights.

2. *The promotion of “civisme” (good social behaviour) and morals:* training citizens to consider national identity more important than ethnic identity.

3. *Creation of a centre for research into education for peace, and the prevention and management of peaceful resolution of conflicts:* This centre is a kind of laboratory for the observation of “mutations” and conflicts, as well as a conduit for the international community to be involved in Burundi.

4. *“Friends of the university :”* an avenue for intellectual interaction on all grounds of interest to the university, both within Burundi and internationally.

These measures are founded on three main principles: first, there is a recognition of the fundamental values of Burundi culture in the promotion of peace and human rights. Second, there is a recognition of the need for openness of mind, exchange of experience and inter-cultural dialogue. Finally, the measures recognized the value of technical skills and intelligence capacities of academics in the peaceful resolution of large problems on the African continent through cooperation and research that would focus on the causes of the crises and solutions. Many of the problems in the Great Lakes are based on genocidal ideology, and the universities need to play a key control in eradicating that ideology.

The history of strife in Burundi is long and bloody, but has never reached the intensity of Rwanda in 1994. Currently the government is under sanction by the world community for the coup by longtime politician and army officer, Pierre Buyoya. The university is attempting to operate in a somewhat different situation to that of Rwanda. While in Rwanda there is rebel activity, the world community is generally behind the existing government of Prime Minister Celestin Rwigema. In Burundi, the university is cut off from the rest of the world because of the

embargo. Thus, the earlier mentioned document also appealed for a loosening of the restrictions, so that the university could carry on as it has in the past.

The university here is in an ambiguous position. The AIPU brief makes it appear as if the university is an unwitting bystander in the fight between the government and the rest of the world. The document does not defend or accuse the government at all. From an outside perspective, however, one might wonder how the university really can be separate from the government. While distance is claimed, it does not seem to be critical distance. This is not to say that the university should necessarily criticize the government, but the possibility of questioning its own position in society does not seem possible.

The problem of critical distance is the predicament of most universities in situations of national crisis. The critical distance a university needs to operate does not seem possible when more pressing concerns, of national security or national integrity, are present. The university in Burundi seems closely circumscribed in its possibilities of inquiry, and as such may not have the freedom of inquiry that it needs. One might object by saying that freedom does, in fact, exist, but my point is not an empirical one. I know of no one at the University of Burundi (or Rwanda, for that matter) who has been censured for their research, or for saying unpopular things. The point I make is philosophical – those people may not even surface, because the university culture in a society in national crisis may preclude any real dissent, or any real attempt to define the problems of society outside of the parameters already explicitly or implicitly mandated by the government. Everyone knows there is a crisis, and crises demand immediate, decisive action. That may mean banding together, swallowing any personal misgivings, and working toward a solution.

Problematizing the University in National Crisis

Following what I have argued so far might lead one to believe that I think there is no place for universities in societies in national crisis. That is not entirely true, but I do believe that these universities have a special responsibility to consider the context in which they operate. The classic university structure is either negated due to the requirements of the crisis (or the government trying to solve the crisis), or it risks becoming irrelevant. There is a solution, I think, but that will come out shortly.

There is more than one reading of the efforts in both Rwanda and Burundi to chart a course for the university, a charitable reading and a suspicious reading. The charitable reading goes like this: The efforts of both universities are attempts to contribute from their strengths to the betterment of society. In both cases, the expertise of the faculty is seen as a resource for the amelioration of societal problems, as identified by the government. In Rwanda's case, the university is working hard to provide the legal personnel to expedite trials of suspected genocide perpetrators. As well, it is trying to contribute to national reconciliation by emphasizing teaching, and by trying to make both French and English accessible to the university-educated Rwandan.⁸ In Burundi's case, the university contributes to the peace process by emphasizing ways of overcoming divisions within society, and by finding reasonable ways to deal with disputes. It provides an avenue for conversation with universities and other NGO's. In both cases, there is an attempt to inculcate the virtues of human rights and tolerance in order to overcome ethnic divisions.

One might, on the other hand, take a more suspicious view of each university's place within society. In the case of Rwanda, the attempt to educate students in English in a previously

Francophone country could be seen as an attempt to shore up the political legitimacy of an invading minority over the majority in the country. Furthermore, it could be seen as an attempt to cover over another distinction, between Rwandans raised in Rwanda (by now, mostly Hutu), and Rwandans raised in Uganda (mostly Tutsi). Not dealing with the French/English division may foster misunderstanding, but dealing with it poorly may simply give credence to yet another division within Rwandan society. As well, the attempts to mirror North American style universities may be difficult given the lack of qualified personnel after the genocide. And finally, one might be suspicious that these modifications in the university structure did not emerge from internal consultation (despite the meetings of July 1997) as much as from government directive or external pressures.

In the case of Burundi, one might argue that the university is emphasizing the kind of peace that supports the government (a government that is currently under sanction because of charges that the democratic process had been subverted). One might also argue that promoting peace and human rights can give the veneer of rationality to one side of a debate, and effectively labels the “rebel” side as irrational because it is not around the bargaining table. And, teaching “civisme” may be little more than inculcating compliance. Behaving civilly is not so different from behaving obediently. It is easy to use the rhetoric of rationality and dialogue when you are in power.

It is not my intention to decide whether the charitable or the suspicious reading is correct, or even to suggest that there is a little of both. The point is this: In both readings, the university is regarded as a tool of the government. The university is not there to decide what the problems of the society might be, or to engage in discussion about the fundamental nature of society, but is

there to provide the expertise to find solutions to problems already identified by those in power. While there is opportunity for conversation in both situations, the opportunity is limited by the political realities in each case. Neither university could really offer a thoroughgoing critique of the society it finds itself in – to do so would be suicide. In both cases, the society is precarious enough that such a critique would be regarded as disloyal, and likely the leaders would be sanctioned or replaced.

And this is the real issue whenever a university finds itself in a national crisis. National crises demand action, and university (even more so, liberal) education requires dialogue. Action is the application of legitimate power; dialogue defers that power in favour of creating possible worlds. Action is technological; dialogue is aesthetic. Action tends to shut down dialogue, because dialogue does not accomplish anything. Dialogue tends to defer action, because the point of dialogue is to maintain itself. Action believes that its agenda must come first, because without the exercise of power, the conditions of dialogue cannot come into being. Dialogue believes that its agenda must come first, because without understanding an issue, one does not really know how to act well.

The tension between action and dialogue is the dilemma of the university, and not only the university in Africa. All universities find themselves in this position. But is there a way to live with that tension, instead of defining the university only in terms of one or the other? Is there a way of putting back together the two parts of techné (making): the making of tools leading to action, and the making of art leading to dialogue and understanding? In a society with the problems of Rwanda or Burundi, the university cannot afford to avoid action. But what action? At the same time, it cannot afford to simply capitulate to the power interests in the rest of

society, whether those interests are represented by government, political factions, external political pressures, religions, or businesses. Furthermore, the university is not an aid agency. While indirectly its job, at least in part, is the amelioration of the ills of society, its primary task is education. But it is a major institution in society. It contributes to what society is, for good or ill. Butera's comments about the responsibility of the university were apt. It cannot be a neutral force, or simply sit on the sidelines until the dust clears. It cannot absolve itself in times of trouble. But what good does university education do in times like these? Both action and dialogue are needed. But neither is enough: action without dialogue is blind, dialogue without action is lame. How, then, can the university find its way when both action and dialogue have their necessary and mutually limiting aspects?

There are some traditional answers to these questions. For example, we could educate people for tolerance, for moral character, for the ability to find peaceful solutions to problems, and so forth. But these seem like liberal answers for a liberal society. These are North American answers. What sense does it make to speak of these things when almost a million people have died in recent history? How do you tell someone to just tolerate the person that killed your brother? Is the answer really to communicate the central values of our own liberal democratic culture, on the assumption that what works for us should work for them? This seems to be the assumption in both cases. Education about human rights and tolerance is central to the plan of action. But everyone uses the rhetoric of rights; equality, freedom, and opportunity are words that can justify the most extreme positions when wielded by a clever spin-doctor. Rights talk can easily be coopted by anyone with an agenda, unless it is couched in a national conversation about what these rights mean. Educating for rights does not necessarily mean raising the tough

questions about the nature of rights. But for this, a stable society is needed, so that conversation does not turn into inquisition.

These liberal democratic virtues tend to be individualistic – each person is educated for his or her own character, and the country will work if all the individuals have a sufficient measure of character. The country becomes the sum total of the character of its people. Unfortunately, this would prove inadequate in Rwanda, particularly. Rwandans do not suffer from lack of individual character, at least no more than anywhere else in the world. The problems of their society do not stem from personal immorality, and a plan to change the attitudes of individuals without setting up the context of public conversation about the nature of society will not succeed.

Education for tolerance, specifically, may not produce what is needed. It is an individualistic virtue, which assumes that each person's opinion has value simply by virtue of it being an opinion held honestly by someone. Tolerance of this sort thrives in a culture of commodities, in a place where free competition between brands of chocolate chip cookies give the illusion but not the reality of difference. This tolerance does not have to be inculcated. It is what North Americans already have in a capitalist society, but it does not address the problems that drive people to kill each other. Countries are not built on tolerance; at best, tolerance merely defers their decline. If a country is already in national crisis, there is nothing to be preserved by teaching people to give each other the space to live. It is not so much tolerance that is needed, but the ability to encounter the other as other, without subsuming it or requiring that it speak your language. Tolerance tends to ignore deep difference, deferring any real encounter with that difference to a later time.

If not just education for tolerance, then, what about education for understanding? If only individuals could understand each other, and if only policy makers and leaders could understand what is happening in the society, all would be well. But one might point out that understanding does not necessarily imply that there is the will to act on the understanding. Furthermore, as the university is a Western institution, set up with a disciplinary structure that emerged during the European Enlightenment and after, we might be asking Africans to understand their problems using lenses not appropriate to the task. Africans, after all, have always been the subject of political, anthropological, religious, and economic studies, in which they were the objects of investigation but never the interlocutors in the discovery and creation of meaning. One interpretation of the university in Africa might be that it is just a reproduction of those Western styles of understanding that have contributed to alienation, a sense of false objectivity of knowledge, and the compartmentalization of knowledge. So, to suppose that the university can offer understanding begs the question: What understanding? Specifically, what kind of understanding, and on whose terms, and who stands to benefit? Is understanding another word for (causal) explanation?

Understanding has another danger – that it can simply amount to theorizing, which suggests the doing of social science in its traditional forms. But can something as extreme as a genocide be theorized? Or long-standing ethnic conflict? Is it just intellectualization? Is understanding merely a way of distancing the brutal concrete reality through the abstraction of theory? How can genocide be understood? And can this understanding contribute to praxis?

These questions are by no means intended to suggest that virtue, human rights, tolerance or understanding are not laudable goals. The point is that these goals, to become part of civic culture as opposed to external imposition, must assume a prior set of conditions which do not in

fact exist. And it is not clear that the university can do much about this problem. The university tends to reproduce its roots, and its roots are in liberal democratic Western society. That means that, when the university tries to promote these as part of a plan for national reconciliation, it may be doing little more than perpetuating the problem by importing Western solutions to African problems. All of these can be coopted by those with an agenda, particularly a government which may be afraid of losing its grip in a precarious situation.⁹ But more than ever, a dialogue is needed to make these goals into inter-subjectively understood goals, rather than objectively defined virtues. And furthermore, any list of virtues will probably turn out to be culture-bound, situation-specific, and depend on a certain level of safety and prosperity to make any sense at all. The virtues, then, are a result of a stable society in which dialogue can occur, not a cause of that society.

Perhaps, then, the university has a different role than to inculcate personal virtues that will ameliorate conditions in a society. It could be that the university must act collectively as a conscience or a moral voice in the country to stem the tide of evil in desperate times. On what authority might the university claim the right to make moral statements? If the church claims faith as its basis, perhaps the university can speak from the morality born of reason. Perhaps the place of the university in dark times is to try to find the reasonable path amidst the unreasonableness of killing. Certainly the Prefet of Butare, who was a university lecturer as well as a premier of a province of Rwanda, likely saw that as his role. The genocide began two weeks later in Butare than anywhere else, and one would like to think that at least some of the reason is that he was trying to take a reasonable moral stand in the middle of madness (although, to be sure, the

fact that he was the only Tutsi Prefet in the country during the massacre of Tutsis probably had something to do with it as well).

As many Rwandan professors went to jail accused of murder as were killed in the genocide, though. If the role of the university was to make a rational moral stand, it failed miserably in convincing even its own members of the putative rationality of non-violent and constructive dialogue.¹⁰ And perhaps this is no surprise. Does reason lead to virtue? Not necessarily, despite what Plato might have thought. The “reason” of the university is so often fragmented into camps, that it is unclear that any real stand could be taken. If reason has taken on the character of technical expertise, the issue of its goal has already been ruled out in any case. And, in a society which began its genocide by killing the moderates, the group that contributed to making the situation less polarized, it is unlikely that the “rational” position has much hope. And finally, as we have already pointed out, supposing that the university’s role is simply one of action in a desperate situation seems to diminish its status as a university. If the university is to exist in desperate times, it seems it must give up its identity to do so.

This tension, between action and dialogue, suggests that the university will need to consider its role carefully. The university must have the ability to go beyond the means-ends thinking of the political elite and show that reason demands more than killing your enemies and praising your friends, in other words more than instrumental rationality. It must be able to critically reflect on the nation, at precisely the time when critical reflection is least welcome. The problem is that the university all too often falls into exactly the same pattern as the political system from which it is supposed to differ.

For Africans, in particular, part of the problem is that solutions have always been imposed using outside, usually Western structures. They have always been the object of study, as the “field” in fieldwork. The emergence of universities in Africa in this century has typically been at the behest of colonizers or settlers, and as often as not has been an attempt to either assimilate Africans into European values, or give them enough skill to act as low-level bureaucrats in the management of their countries. At independence, most African countries saw universities as the avenue to wealth creation.

All of this suggests that the liberal values associated with the university do not take us far enough. If one wanted to be sceptical, one could see the university as part of the attempt to make over Africa in the image of the West, like the nation, the church, and the instruments of the economy. If this is true, it makes it all the more difficult to imagine the university as having any place in the amelioration of the problems in Rwanda or Burundi.

The attempt to answer the question of whether universities have a place in a society under extreme stress requires that we decide what the place of the university has been, including some reflection on the similarities and differences of the relationship between the university and society between Africa and North America. Most scholarship has attempted to answer North American tensions, and this will have limited application to Africa. For example, there are some uniquely African issues that require a new attempt to understand the university. First, the university is not an African institution. It is an institution with a history in mediaeval Europe and the Enlightenment. Its structure answers certain questions about the nature and structure of knowledge, which has resulted in disciplinary structures that assume that knowledge is objective, dispassionate, and reducible to component parts and specific questions. Now, the university is

being asked to function in a new context. These questions cannot be answered by simply appealing to existing disciplinary structures because disciplines themselves are answers to questions with a specific cultural history. So, simply supposing that the university can investigate African problems in the same way it would investigate any other question may not address the issue – that the answer is an answer to someone else’s question.

The second issue arises from the first: the university draws from a culture, and at the best, interprets that culture for itself. It is not the only interpreter, but is one which has a specific character, not the same as the interpretation a church, political party, or trade union might offer. But the present university has always drawn from another culture when it has attempted to interpret. Its methods are those honed as disputations in mediaeval Europe, experiments in the Enlightenment, and the increasing specialization that emerges when the culture demands that its interpretations have technological outcomes. Rwandan and Burundian society, on the other hand, do not have this history. Rwanda and Burundi’s histories, until recently, are not the same as those of Western technological societies. But the university has evolved as a response to Western technological society, either the positive response of providing the personnel to fuel that technology, or the critical response which tries to show that there is more to life than technology. These are not the battles Rwanda and Burundi face, and if the university has those issues as part of its modern identity, then it seems ill-equipped to answer the questions that Rwanda and Burundi actually have.

The third issue, which makes discourse about the Western university ill-fitted to the African situation, is that when the Western university does get around to acknowledging other cultures or ways of knowing, this is almost always put in terms of cross-cultural dialogue. So,

any attempt to think about what the university looks like in Africa must wade through the dominant preoccupations of the university in North America and what it can learn from contact with another culture. So, if an African university tries to make use of the reflections on the nature of the university produced in North America or Europe, more often than not that university will find that the issues are not relevant at all. So, what can the university in Africa do, in the midst of unrest?

The Nature of the University in a National Crisis

We may be able to see in the Great Lakes region an attempt to negotiate a balance between dialogue and action under extreme conditions. People may differ about the level of success of that negotiation, but it may be in the insistent nature of power that action becomes most urgent, and in the intractable nature of the problems that dialogue becomes most important. The extremes of Rwandan and Burundian society do not offer different issues than we encounter in the West, but only give a more stark picture of the issues that exist for universities in any society.

The universities in Rwanda and Burundi have attempted to find a positive role in their respective societies, to contribute to the lessening of the stress. These roles so far have been largely as tools of a power outside of themselves, in both cases governments who have as their primary interests the peace of the nation, but as their secondary interest not losing control in a precarious situation. The university is in a difficult place in both cases, then, because as a major institution in society, it must contribute to society, but that contribution is defined by a body outside of it. Attempting to define the problems from within the university will not be accepted

willingly, for in a precarious situation, dissent or criticism will be seen as counterproductive, and possibly even hostile. The university under these conditions, then, runs the risk of either validating the existing rhetoric of power, or providing the “experts” who can make the externally determined solutions a reality, a move which also serves to validate the existing power structures. The university, then, seems to be drawn out of its role as a place where free inquiry is fostered, and is either marginalised (made safe), or turned into a tool.

One answer to the general question of the place of the university in any society is to appeal to the Greek notion of “paideia”: “the education needed for contemporary human beings to be in an adequate relation to their times, to be able to “apply” themselves to it, to its promises as well as frustrations.”¹¹ Paideia actually has the implications of the training of children, and is normally contrasted to looking after their material needs. This is a good description of the kind of education that will work in the context of the extreme crisis, if anything will. But the question still stands – is there any education that will enable someone to be in an adequate relationship to a war, or to the recovery from genocide? Is the national crisis an aporia, a disruption, which does not lend itself to the processes of education? Indeed, do we actually educate for the time after the crisis, rather than for the crisis itself?

And, does this undermine the usefulness of the university? Universities are founded on liberal education, which is education that assumes continuity, peace, and stability. Assuming that the university has a place here ignores the question of what space a university can operate in, and in fact change the focus from one of reflexive understanding of society, to that of engineering a solution to the crisis.

But can there be these sorts of solutions, or preventions, to crises? Crises, by definition, are unique events. While we can draw analogies from other, similar crises, it is rare that a crisis is actually solved or prevented. What actually happens is that a society constructs an understanding of itself that allows a move past the impasse. Solutions, on the other hand, come in the form of setting the conditions that will defuse the impasse before it occurs. So, education is often cited as a preventive measure for national crises of this sort. But if the education is of the sort that tries to inculcate “values” or “human rights,” the solutions are left ambiguous, partial and prone to being coopted by various agendas, as has already been argued. Some will say that this is the best we can do, but it may not be. Educating for crisis management leaves us with an education that does not come to terms with what the crisis actually is. It imagines that the actors (educators) have no position themselves. That throws the university into the dilemma of action vs. dialogue, which is difficult to overcome.

This notion of paideia, however, may have some merit. While education may not be possible in the context of national crisis, perhaps it is possible if we take the sting out of the word “crisis.” This is, after all, an evaluative label. No one would suggest that the genocide in Rwanda or the unrest in Burundi are not crises, but that does not make the term any less evaluative. We cannot avoid using terms of valuation for any circumstance people find themselves in, but calling something a crisis presupposes a certain attitude toward the times, which in turn calls for certain kinds of action. The universities in Rwanda and Burundi are both bound to follow the definition of the times as given by the government and by outside figures.

But paideia is the process of defining the times, not simply reacting to a definition. The child under paideia learns not only to react to the givenness of the times, but to contribute toward

their creation. Those times need to be imagined – in other words, paideia does not happen simply to get away from some condition, but to bring into being something which is not-yet.

What is an “adequate relation to the times” in Rwanda and Burundi? It is not for me to say – that is the task for Rwandans and Burundians. At best outsiders like me might be able to be part of a dialogue. Indeed, the time may come that the university has to not look to technical expertise from the outside, but imaginative and creative possibilities from the inside. The university can have a place in the construction of what an adequate relation to the times might be. There are some possibilities that might make this construction possible:

1. Encourage poetry. Understanding something as cataclysmic as genocide, or as tenacious as war, requires finding a language with which to speak. The best that the university can offer is to pay attention to how language works. This may be in a critical vein, pointing out the alienated discourse of various political or ideological positions. But more important, it must encourage talk about what happened. This is both action and dialogue, and effectively bridges the split mentioned earlier. Part of the problem is that meaning has been constructed down very narrow lines, lines which provide the conditions for the possibility of a crisis. The richness of human experience has been flattened to two and only two positions. It may be that the current milieu of crisis management also flattens the world. Perhaps the university can contribute to making the world rich again.

My suggestion is to encourage poetry. I use the term poetry very broadly, to indicate the ways of speaking we have that do not reduce the world to propositions. The technical skills at the university tend to strive for precision in language, defined as language which circumscribes and limits concepts. Like modern science, that precision leads to control. And like modern science,

the question is always open as to who has the control. Poetry offers different possibilities – not precision, but fecundity; not control, but imagination. There is certainly a place for precision, but the university does itself and its society a disservice to suppose that this is the only goal worth striving for.

2. *Encourage the generalist.* The university would do well to encourage the rare person who is able to bridge areas of knowledge and who can collect different ways of knowing into a coherent whole. Rwanda had Alexis Kagame, who was just such a person. While his particular synthesis may have inadvertently served to solidify certain views about ethnicity in Rwanda, he also was able to help pull together the Rwandan sense of self. More like him are needed.

The difficulty will be that the generalist does not seem to be the one who can immediately solve the pressing problems. When problems are defined in reductionist terms, it takes a specialist to address them. But the generalist may be the one who enables a country to rethink the nature of the problems themselves, rather than simply coming up with cleverer solutions. The country certainly needs those who can repair the infrastructure, prosecute the criminals, and provide the goods of society so that there is not a constant pattern of poverty, famine, unrest, and repression. But even in these areas, the specialist qua specialist may overtake the priorities of the university and country, defining problems in reductionist and materialist ways.

3. *Take the lead of German reflection after WWII.* German academics agonized over how something like national socialism could happen in Germany. Jaspers, Gadamer, Arendt, and many others tried to give an account of how things ended up as they did. The point is not that they were able to come up with a cause-and-effect account of things, but that they were able to coalesce different understandings of German actions. It is important to stress that German

answers to the questions of national crisis will not be African ones. And, indeed, one might question the various reflections on German guilt for a whole variety of reasons. But the point is that the collective reflection on the nature of the society was a healing process. It was not simply done by educating Germans that Jews are not the problem after all or by stressing human rights. The healing process has been more complex than this.

This is perhaps the place of the university in countries such as Rwanda and Burundi, where the government in the midst of national crisis continues. It is not simply to prepare teachers and lawyers, important as these things might be. In doing only this, the university risks being part of the problem, which is to create a society in which all problems are addressed as technological problems. It is not simply to promote human rights and civisme – that too may be regarded as an attempt to solve the problem of unrest by adjusting the attitudes of the citizenry. But the cynical version of this is that it is simply a way of ensuring compliance within society. And ensuring compliance undermines the discourse that can happen by delimiting it.

4. Find ways of moving past disciplinarity. Disciplines are artifacts of the modern West, and are not coextensive with the university. The mediaeval university did not have disciplines in the sense that we have today – the trivium and quadrivium are not really groups of disciplines, but a two-step system which first establishes the tools for acquiring any knowledge, and then applies them to the most abstract examples. Disciplines, on the other hand, are directed at a particular subject matter, have their own internally justified methods, and tend to prefer specialization over wide-ranging general principles as the surest path to knowledge. Disciplines are modern answers to modern Western problems. I am not suggesting that disciplines should be jettisoned; the past cannot be undone. But one way of resisting the impulse to regard all problems as technological

ones is to foster conversation designed to unsettle the comfortable disciplinary ways of doing things. While no one wishes for a national crisis, once one exists it could provide the opportunity to do things differently.

The universities in Rwanda and Burundi have an unenviable and complex task. But every crisis brings the possibility of change. And there are success stories in Africa – Uganda, Botswana, Eritrea. The key from the university’s point of view will be to avoid being forced into an agenda that actually negates its potential as a societal force.

Notes

1. Gérard Prunier, The Rwanda Crisis 1959-1994: History of a Genocide. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997: 265.
2. Interview with Jean Bosco Butera, Vice-Recteur, Université Nationale du Rwanda, May 1997.
3. Interview with Jean Bosco Butera, May 1997.
4. Interview with Jean Bosco Butera, October 20, 1997.
5. Gérard Prunier, The Rwanda Crisis: 78-79.
6. Interview with Pr Tharcisse Nsabimana, Vice-Recteur, Université du Burundi, June 1997.
7. n.a., “L’Université du Burundi face à la guerre civile, communication à la conférence du conseil africain et du moyen orient de l’AIPU, tenue à Assouan en Égypte du 16 au 20 février 1997 par la délégation burundaise.”, report presented at the L’association Internationale de Pédagogie Universitaire conference in Cairo.
8. Interview with Jean Bosco Butera, May 1997.
9. It should be noted that none of this implies that Western societies are any better at avoiding the pitfalls of the “rights and virtues” rhetoric.
10. Although it should be said that the university was no less successful than other institutions of society. The church, particularly, did not only fail to stand against the genocide as a collective body, but there are stories of priests and nuns that actually led the slaughter.
11. Editor’s introduction to Gadamer, Hans Georg Gadamer on Education, Poetry, and History: Applied Hermeneutics. Eds. Dieter Misgeld and Graeme Nicholson. Albany: SUNY, 1992: viii.

