

Book Review: Making Ubumwe: Power, State and Camps in Rwanda's Unity-Building Project by Andrea Purdeková

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Purdeková, Andrea. *Making Ubumwe: Power, State and Camps in Rwanda's Unity-Building Project*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2015. xiv + 292 pages. Hardcover, \$100.00.

Making Ubumwe: Power, State and Camps in Rwanda's Unity-Building Project is the product of a doctoral dissertation by Andrea Purdeková at Oxford, based on her ethnographic study of post-genocide Rwanda. The thematic focus of the research is building unity (ubumwe) in a divided society. The book explores the extent of state-directed, social and political, re-engineering activities aimed at building togetherness and social transformation in the wake of the mass slaughter of the Tutsi in Rwanda by members of the Hutu majority government. Unity, although an ambiguous term, is a window to understand the complex processes of reconciliation activities and formulation of citizen identities following the 1994 tragedy which resulted in approximately 2,000,000 Rwandans, mostly Hutus, becoming refugees after the counterstrike by the Tutsi-backed Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) which took control of the country. Broadly, the book explores not only the prospects for nation-building, but also the prospects for stability, long-term peace, and social justice in Rwanda.

Ubumwe in this context is a fundamentally politicized word, designed to combat divisionism and “promote the building of Rwandanness and Rwandanicity” (p. 6). As a term of choice, ubumwe is a derivation of the word umwe or ‘one’ and literally translates as ‘oneness.’ To this end, the government abolished the mention of ethnicity (Twa—the earliest inhabitants of Rwanda, as well as Hutu, and Tutsi) in an attempt at de-ethnicization. Of all the official initiatives created under the banner of unity and reconciliation, Purdeková devotes special attention to one of these activities, namely, *ingando* camps. These camps are retreats for intense civic education for different segments of the population, including students, released prisoners, street children, youth and adult ex-combatants, and church Adventist youth. Many of the activities are not random; rather, they are official discourse shaped and organized by the state agency, the National Unity and Reconciliation Commission (NURC).

As Purdeková explains, the “unity as officially pursued in Rwanda is deeply political” (p. 61). The government polices the country so tightly, such that little organized or mass spontaneous protests are allowed, and crime levels are low, producing repressive social control. For all intents and purposes, unity means aligning oneself with the policies and ideologies of the government. Unity is even presented as an essential condition for peace, stability and prosperity. It is the manner in which the discourse of unity is framed, Purdeková contends, that legitimizes authoritarian rule in Rwanda today. In fact, the lines between the state and the ruling party are indistinct. All state administrators are party members pressured into party affiliation; membership is phrased in the language of ‘family’ or ‘extended lineage,’ and those who do not join are scared of being singled out as dissidents bent on a diversionist agenda. In effect, the discourse on unity and reconciliation are power instruments deployed to muffle and discourage

dissent. The claim by government to have restored inter-ethnic unity may have been achieved through the rule of fear. A joke passed around the city of Kigali summed it up this way: the “Government of Rwanda is like MTN [Mobile Telephone Networks]—everywhere you go” (p. 89). Further, an igando Camp Coordinator added, “Even if I am not here, there are so many eyes” (p. 90). Nonetheless, with the deeply amplified distrust stemming from the genocide, the emotional barometer in public life is one of fear and distrust of the government.

The highlight of the book is the various unity-building tools deployed, of which ingando camps stand out as probably the most effective civic education fora for instilling a culture of togetherness, that is, love of the nation, and defense of the country and its policies. Their effectiveness may be due to mandatory attendance, emphasis on militaristic discipline and respect for authority, and the transmission of relevant attitudes, behaviors, and knowledge expected of each ‘new citizen.’ Consequently, in these ‘social laboratories,’ unity building and state building in contemporary Rwanda are meshed. The extent of social control, according to Purdeková, is unparalleled, even when compared to other African countries with state reach such as Burundi or Eritrea. Is Rwanda unique in this sense? Perhaps, in some respects, but differences may also be ones of degree.

In conclusion, Purdeková argues that it would be incorrect to claim a lack of unity building in post-genocide Rwanda. To its credit, the book achieves its primary objective by offering in-depth analyses of the processes of unity building being engineered through government interventions. Purdeková suggests the need for research on Africa to shift from focusing on the absences to the presences of the state, and she hopes that the book inspires further research on reconciliation and reintegration strategies, such as civic education camps and effective strategies for long term stability and peace. As the book is not policy-oriented and, hence, specifies no policy guidelines for unity building and reconciliation, this avenue is also open to future researchers. *Making Ubumwe: Power, State and Camps in Rwanda’s Unity-Building Project* will be of relevance to students of cultural anthropology, political theory, government, and African Studies.

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