Rwandan Perceptions of Jews, Judaism, and Israel

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Abstract

Religious studies of Rwanda typically focus on Christianity’s involvement before, during, and after the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi, also referred to as the Rwandan Genocide. Rwanda’s postgenocide reconstruction has witnessed new and changing political and social commitments by previously established religious organisations such as the Roman Catholic, Protestant, and Adventist Churches. The Rwandan government has taken a more progressive stance on divisions of power and religious institutions, and the promotion of religious freedoms that has benefitted the domestic Muslim population. This essay examines how Judaism, a previously unknown religion in the region, is impacting Rwandan identity formation. Jewish identity is increasingly being tied to the nation’s own reconstructed identity, with a strong focus on historical persecution, rebuilding after genocide, and development. This essay suggests that Rwandan identity and religious studies should include the ever-growing ties with Jews and Israel to better understand its political and social reconstruction since 1994.

Keywords

Rwanda – Christianity – Judaism – foreign relations – Israel – genocide

1 Introduction

For international audiences, Rwanda’s identity consists of its horrific 1994 genocide. Within a period of around 100 days, Rwandans butchered neighbours, with an estimated one million Tutsis and moderate Hutus being killed (Kigali Memorial Centre 2004; Prunier 1997). Stemming from German and Belgian colonial history, ethnic identity formation experienced periods of alternating and ultimately favouritism with the Tutsi population, to the detriment of
the Hutu majority. The exact ethnic history of Rwanda is disputed, with two polarising descriptions of Rwanda’s sociological history. One historical interpretation describes Rwanda’s ethnic origins as stemming from a common ancestral population. The major divisions of society stemmed from socioeconomic standings based on the number of cattle one owned, which determined whether someone was a Tutsi (ten cows or more), Hutu (fewer than ten cows), or Twa (typically owning no cows or only one or two) (Prunier 1997). The current Rwandan government, controlled by the Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF), holds this perception of Rwandan ethnic history. Any diverging opinions are strictly monitored and typically labelled as ‘divisionist’ propaganda that intends to bring back the genocide ideology of eliminating the nation’s Tutsis (Gready 2010; Hintjens 2001).

Prior to the 1994 genocide and the political domination of the RPF, the Hamitic myth was a dominating narrative. This historical interpretation was fostered by colonial rule with great support from the Roman Catholic and Anglican Churches, and states that ethnic divisions have always existed in Rwandan history (Ensign and Bertrand 2009; Longman 2001). It holds that the indigenous Twa population experienced two waves of immigration, with the Hutu being first, followed by the Tutsis from Ethiopia (Eltringham 2006). There was even speculation that the Tutsis were perhaps one of the lost tribes of Israel (Religion News Service 1996). However, this view never received much credibility within Rwandan society. Precolonial and colonial history comprises Tutsi domination over Hutus and Twa, which was only rectified by the 1959 Hutu Revolution and subsequent First (1962–1973) and Second (1973–1994) Republics (Prunier 1997). This historical perspective has typically been supported by Christian missions and institutions.

Early Rwandan ethnic identity formation is intertwined with the involvement of European Christianity. Major religious historical events fostered Rwanda’s Christian identity, such as the introduction of the first Catholic missionary by the White Fathers in the late nineteenth century; the conversion of Mwami (King) Mutara III Rudahigwa in 1943; the establishment of Christian dominance in Rwanda in 1946; the ethnic divisions promoted by the leader of the Catholic Church in the 1940s, Andre Perraudin; the rise of Rwanda’s first president, Gregorie Kayibanda; the Hutu Revolution; and the 1973 coup by former Defence Minister Major General Juvenal Habyarimana that led to an increased role for church officials, from administering educational and health services to drafting public policy (Carney 2014). These major religious events within Rwanda’s colonial and postcolonial history fostered the interdependent relationships within society, and the government’s entangled relationship with Christian institutions. During much of this relationship Christianity became
a venue for the promotion of ethnic divisionism and anti-Tutsi ideology that ultimately resulted in the 1994 Rwandan genocide. Within this horrific genocide, churches became the sites of most of the massacres. Many churches in Rwanda hold some legacy of either promoting anti-Tutsi genocide ideology or being killing centres. Since the political takeover of the RPF after the genocide, the perception and political power of Christianity has decreased (Beloff 2015).

Research on religion in Rwanda resides not only in Christian studies since Kasule (1982) and Benda (2013) examine Islam within Rwandan history. However, the general literature on non-Christian history in colonial and post-colonial Rwanda is rather limited. Discussion of Judaism is largely absent since there has traditionally been little engagement between Rwandans and Jews. However, links between Rwanda and Judaism can provide insights into not only Rwandan perceptions of Jews but how Rwandans see themselves today and their aspirations as a postgenocide society. This includes the promotion of self-reliance through the agaciro ideology and the examination of other development models found in global Jewish populations. Despite the growing positive perception of Jews, there is a systemic problem of the categorisation of all Jews as a single ethno-religious practice without variation, including religious practices and traditions as well as geographical heritage. While the problem of what is Jewish identity is discussed in larger literature by researchers such as Herman (1977), Hart (2000), Katz, et al. (2019), Yadgar (2011), and Waxman (2010), it takes on a different meaning within Rwanda, which had little to no Jewish community but whose residents still hold positive opinions of Jews. The 1994 genocide greatly altered this dynamic within several different aspects of Rwandan study, with politics and society comparing the genocide to the Holocaust. Writers such as Gourevitch (2008), Hatzfeld (2005), and Levene (1999) provide ‘common threads’ between the two genocides through the comparison of the suffering of Rwandan Tutsis and Jews, and the resulting denial of genocide. Gourevitch illustrates the similarity:

Just as Jews were highly integrated into German society before the Nazis came to power, so were Tutsi close to Hutu in many respects. Unlike the Jews, the Tutsi had no residual language of their own, no distinctive cultural practices of their own, and no separate religious beliefs; all these were shared among Rwandans in general.

Gourevitch 2008, 47

Denial is resistant to evidence, and as in Germany during the Nazi era, such denial started before the genocide was over, and even before it began, and has continued now it is (more or less) over. There are still
Within these comparisons, Gourevitch unintentionally illustrates a problem when discussing Jewish experience under Nazism and Rwanda's genocide. He provides a single Jewish identity that does not incorporate the wide variety of Jewish practices, customs, and cultures, let alone experiences of Jews not residing in Europe during World War Two. Despite Gourevitch's description of the similarity, other researchers such as Lemarchand (2002), Hintjens (1999), Pottier (2002), and Miles (2000) oppose this comparison for various reasons. Most notable is Lemarchand, who responds to the similarities of the two genocides:

In pointing to its [Levene's comparison] shortcomings – his [Levene's] neglect of the regional and historical contexts – the aim is to raise problems of analysis which are of immediate concern to historians of the Holocaust yet seldom appear to cross the minds of Rwanda specialists, namely, the relative importance of context and circumstance as distinct from intention or ideology.

Lemarchand 2002, 500

This sharp rebuke to Levene's comparison illustrates the difference in analysing genocide. Gourevitch and Levene provide what could be considered a micro examination by studying and discussing the victims' pain during their respective genocides. Lemarchand, Eltringham, and Miles attempt to provide a more holistic and macro examination of the multiple factors that led to the 1994 genocide. By incorporating these different factors, the comparison becomes difficult to justify. These authors do not directly discuss the relationship and perceptions of Rwandans, whether identified as genocide survivors, perpetrators, bystanders or liberators, and those of Jews to the global Jewish community, Holocaust survivors, or Israel. While Eltringham does provide some insights into how Rwandans identify with mostly Ashkenazi Jewish victims and survivors of the Holocaust, the analysis is restricted to that of a shared genocide experience (Eltringham 2004). This research attempts to expand the literature of Rwanda's relationship with religion to explore the perceptions of Rwandans about Judaism. It also discusses the single identity that Rwandans foster of who and what they perceive as a 'Jew'. Finally, the article examines
how positive perceptions of Jews impact Rwanda’s growing foreign relationship with Israel.

This research relies heavily on research conducted during multiple fieldwork periods in 2008 and 2016, and between 2019 and 2020, interviewing both Rwandan government elites and officials – bureaucrats working in various government ministries and institutions. Additionally, the author conducted formal and informal discussions with members of the Association des Etudiants Et Éleves Rescapés Du Genocide (AERG) and Ibuka; both are organisations for genocide survivors. Nearly all informants that were interviewed were labelled as ‘Rwandan’ along with a letter, and only the month and year provided in the reference in order to protect their identities from any possible repercussions based on their comments and opinions. During the later research period additional Rwandan interviews were conducted as well as with the newly established Jewish community in Kigali.

There is an ethical dynamic of this research that needs to be at least mentioned: my personal religious identity was a factor in people’s willingness to discuss this topic with me. Interestingly enough, many informants would initiate a discussion on Jewish/Israeli-Rwandan relations based on their awareness of my ethno-religious identity. During many of my research trips I wore a Jewish yamaka, a type of small religious head covering, that represents the division between man and God. This became a physical sign that illustrated to Rwandans that I was Jewish. Multiple Rwandan informants and participants perceived me as and called me a ‘Jewish Brother of Rwanda’ (Beloff 2014). Similarly, as described by Fujii (2009), my informants were often judging my identity, but often positively. The positive perception stemming from the emotionalism (Silverman 2013) of what they perceived as a ‘Jewish Brother’ and the connotations associated with that are described in this essay. This resulted in greater willingness to discuss their beliefs about Judaism, Jews, and Israel. Interpretivism found within constructivism was used to better understand the social meanings found in the collected data from semi-structured interviews. In addition, triangulation methods were used to verify if informants’ comments were similar to comments from other interviews (Lamont 2015).

2 Similarities and Idealisation of Rwandans

Rwandan perceptions of Judaism as a religious faith rather than a population (Jews) are rather limited since there had been little exposure to the faith (independent from Christianity) prior to 1994. There is little evidence of Jewish
engagement in central Africa unlike other regions in Africa, such as in West Africa with Jewish trade engagements (Mark and Horta 2013; Lydon 2009). Thus awareness of the faith would only be available from Christian teachings. It can be assumed that Judaism would not be discussed by Christian leaders since during colonisation and the First and Second Republics churches applied political pressure and helped share public policies against other faiths. The most notable example is Islam, which had already established a small community. Since the introduction of Christianity by the White Fathers and even today, the practice of Christianity typically refrains from discussing the religion’s Jewish roots. As one practicing Catholic (Rwandan A) described it: ‘Growing up, I went to church every day. Religion was so important in my family growing up. But I never was taught that it came from Judaism. It was always that Jesus Christ was Christian and everyone in the Bible was Christian’.1

We can speculate about the reasons why church leaders did not discuss Judaism, but it probably stems from the lack of necessity since there was no preexisting Jewish community or engagement with Jews prior to the introduction of Christianity. This lack of Christian leaders discussing their religion’s historical roots in Judaism differs from the deep-rooted anti-Semitism that Goldhagen (1996) and Brustein (2003) describe when witnessing Christian leaders condemning Judaism. However, anti-Semitic practices such as the demonization of Jews by Christian leaders outside of Africa were similar to those against the Rwandan Tutsi population. After colonisation and prior to the genocide, the Rwandan Tutsi populations, like fellow Rwandan Hutus, shared religious practices, being divided only by whether they attended a Roman Catholic or Anglican Church. Despite the difference in denominations, priests and religious leaders often shared sermons preaching ethnic-based hatred.

A comparison between Jewish and Tutsi suffering is often found within debates on genocide (Eltringham 2004; Goldhagen 1996; Lemarchand 2002; Levene 1999; Longman 2001; Miles 2000). However, the identity of the sufferers is contentious in Rwanda, with informants often describing Tutsi experiences but naming the affected group as ‘Rwandan’. Rwandans’ experiences of persecution at the hands of Christian religious leaders and the resulting suffering would often be discussed alongside informants’ perceptions of shared experiences with Jews. While relatively unaware of Judaism, many were aware of the historical suffering of Ashkenazi Jews in Europe beyond just the Holocaust. However, there is limited knowledge of the suffering of Sephardic Jews during the Iberian Inquisition or the forced migration of Mizrahi Jews from the Middle East, to name a few examples. Rwandans educated after the genocide were most aware of the historical persecution of Jews prior to the Holocaust. Most of Rwanda’s perception and understanding of Jews surrounds the suffering of
Ashkenazi Jews. Nevertheless, the shared experiences of suffering as a result of Christian leaders’ rhetoric and actions illustrates an underlining theme held by many Rwandans of a common hardship and the idealisation to aspire to and to some extent replicate Jewish redevelopment after the Holocaust.

2.1 Historical Persecution and Genocide Identity Formation

Historical comparisons of the Holocaust and the Rwandan genocide are not new or unique, as previously discussed. Lemarchand provides a description of how Jewish scholars and commentators are drawn to comparing collective memories of Jews and Rwandan Tutsis:

> It is not a matter of coincidence if the Rwandan genocide makes immediate claims on the collective memories of Jews everywhere, if Jewish commentators are instinctively drawn to identify with the agonies of the Tutsi, and if an exceptionally close relationship has since developed between the state of Israel and post-genocide Rwanda.  

LEMARCHANT 2009, 111

It is not only Jewish commentators who connect the suffering of Rwandan Tutsis and Jews, but Rwandans themselves. The similarity of experiences of persecution has led many Rwandans to perceive a mutual understanding of pain with Jews. The historical persecution of Jews is seen as a common cause so that predominately Rwandan Tutsis feel a sense of camaraderie and understanding of Jewish historical suffering. One Rwandan genocide survivor (Rwandan C) commented: ‘Jews and Rwandans are brothers and sisters. We have been victims of persecution and hate-filled sermons by the church. Like the Jews in Europe, Rwandans have suffered pogroms in [19]59, [19]60 to [19]62, 1973, and before 1994. The Jews have these experiences too. We know each other’s pain’.2

This comment aligns closely with the belief of shared historical persecution beyond just the genocides. For this informant, the historical persecution of Rwandans is greatly similar to the experience of those he identifies as Jewish ‘brothers and sisters’. He includes events of suffering such as the pogroms committed against Rwandan Tutsis since the 1959 Hutu Revolution as part of the genocide (Prunier 1997). However, he focuses primarily on persecution experienced by Ashkenazi and perhaps even Sephardic Jews, but does not incorporate the experiences of other non-European Jewish groups. For example, Mizrahi experiences in the Middle East were relatively peaceful during the Islamic period (Medding 2007). Nevertheless, his description follows closely with how the recent government accounts of the genocide as the result of the systematic persecution of Rwandan Tutsis rather than a disconnected event.
that was initiated as a result of the Rwandan Civil War (1990–1994) and/or the shooting down of the presidential plane of the former president, Juvenal Habyarimana, on 6 April 1994. This is significant in showing how the current government perceives its history and the ethnic conflict (Hintjens 2008).

Notable in Rwandan C’s comment is the usage of the word ‘Rwandans’ as the victim group throughout Rwandan history. This comparison between Jews and ‘Rwandans’ is problematic for multiple different reasons, most notably who is included in this identity of ‘Rwandan’ and ‘Jew’. It can be observed that during his mention of historical periods of persecution he is describing the suffering of the Rwandan Tutsi population rather than the general population. While not stating the Tutsi ethnic identity outright, it follows historical events that witnessed Rwanda’s Tutsi population suffering at the hands of Rwandan Hutus (Prunier 1997). This vagueness of identity can be found in much of the literature that compares the 1994 genocide to the Holocaust (Lemarchand 2009; Miles 2000).

What perhaps complicates this comparison further is the Rwandan government’s narrative push in its description of Rwandan history and genocide. The use of ‘Rwandan’ rather than specific ethnic labels is due to a commonly held belief of RPF officials, stemming from the 1987 Eight-Point Programme, that crafted a new identity based on a uniform and singular ‘one Rwanda’ identity (Kinzer 2009; Prunier 1997). Multiple scholars (Cowell 2012; Thomson 2012; Eramian 2014; Pells, Pontalti, and Williams 2014; Hodgkin 2006) have already examined how the RPF have used their version of Rwandan history to continue to hold power and dominate the domestic sphere. Eltringham illustrates the RPF’s attempt to promote shared historical pain. As described by a Rwandan government official (in office prior to 1994) living in exile: ‘[President Paul] Kagame is exploiting the Holocaust. Both Tutsi and Jews have suffered, but in a different manner and for different reasons’ (Eltringham 2004, 55). Supporters of the RPF are also supportive of the belief of shared suffering: ‘The Jews had the same language and culture as the Germans, which was also the case in Rwanda’ (Eltringham 2004, 52). However, this is problematic since a majority of global Jews did not reside in Germany in the 1930s, which had only a population of around half a million. Also, many of the victims of the Holocaust spoke Yiddish rather than German, composed of various languages from Central and Eastern Europe as well as Hebrew (Jacobs 2005). Identity politics within current Rwandan society are not as stagnated as in previous forms focusing on ethnicity.

The use of the term ‘Rwandan’ problematises the shared emotional impact of past persecutions and genocide. Not all Rwandans suffered after colonisation; rather, the Tutsis experienced the negative repercussions and persecutions of
the Hutu Revolution and up to the 1994 genocide. It is thus difficult to confirm a shared experience between Rwandans and Jews since not all Rwandans experienced persecution. It would seem better to label the shared suffering as occurring between Jews and Rwandan Tutsis. However, this can be problematic within Rwandan society since it could be interpreted as promoting ethnic divisionism. Despite the problem of accuracy in describing shared historical pain, Rwandans still attempt to promote this similar suffering through the manipulation of terminologies that relate to genocide. The name of the Rwandan genocide has changed to its current form: ‘genocide against the Tutsi’ (Kagire 2014). Rwandan government officials often describe the name change as a way to better represent the genocide, as well as provide ownership. This is not the only genocide to have a differing name in Rwanda: the Holocaust also has a different and more politically advantageous name, ‘the genocide against the Jews’.

Within the Rwandan government genocide commemoration and remembrance are perceived as a key mechanism in preventing future genocides. It is the responsibility of the National Commission for the Fight against Genocide (CNLG) to annually commemorate the genocide, preserve genocide artefacts, and combat genocide denial (National Commission for the Fight against Genocide 2018). One of their multiple responsibilities in preserving the history and preventing a repetition of the 1994 genocide is helping establish the parameters for the teaching about the 1994 genocide in schools and educational facilities. At the CNLG many documents intended for educational purposes labelled and described the Holocaust as ‘the genocide against [the] Jews’ with little to no mention of other victim groups. Not only did the description of the Holocaust consist primarily of Jewish victims, but the name itself was changed to ‘genocide against the Jews’ in a public-school textbook. This name change does not account for Smith’s examination of the motives of genocide perpetrators (Smith 1987), but rather the intention to make it fit closer to how the Rwandan government names the 1994 genocide. Thus the shared experience might be seen as a mechanism to promote RPF identity politics.

However, it is difficult to assume that the shared experience is simply rooted in political motivations. Many informants genuinely commented on the desire for deeper relations between Jews and Rwandans, based on the shared historical suffering. This could be one of the primary reasons why Rabbi Shmuel ‘Shmuley’ Botech provided the keynote speech during the twentieth commemoration of the genocide in April 2014 (Boteach 2014). Those responsible for organising the commemoration may have wanted a Jewish religious leader to speak at this important event in order to foster greater ties between Rwandans and Jews.
There are different interpretations of the shared experiences within the context of the perception of history. While you have a Rwandan genocide survivor (Rwandan C) mentioning a link between Rwandans and Jews, there are others who hold different opinions. Eltringham provides descriptions of how some perceive the Rwandan genocide as worse than the Holocaust (Eltringham 2004). Even former United States president Bill Clinton commented on how genocide forces were able to murder Tutsi victims more quickly than the Nazis murdered Holocaust victims (Pottier 2002). These comments about the Rwandan genocide being more lethal than the Holocaust were not commonly discussed and were even dismissed by my informants. Rather, many wanted to have a similar historical experience with Jews in order to better understand their own personal history. One informant (Rwandan D) commented:

I remember after the RPF came and liberated my home outside of Kigali. Everyone was dead; there seemed to be no way for us to become whole again. How can you rebuild from ashes? I was a teenager and discovered a book on world history. I read it and discovered the Holocaust. The Jews experienced genocide like we did, they experienced massacres and pogroms like my family experienced. And they rebuilt after each one. If they can do it, then we can too. But we need their help. They can be our older brothers and show us the way forward so we don’t feel so alone.3

For this informant, the Holocaust and Jewish persecution brought him a sense of relief and happiness. It was not a mechanism for a perception of his own history that could fall in line with established RPF rhetoric. Instead, the knowledge that another group suffered similar pain provided a sense of relief that he was not alone in what he experienced. More importantly, the discovery of Jewish suffering in the Holocaust led to the belief in the ability for rebirth and growth. Much of Rwanda’s desire for relations between Rwandans – whether Tutsi or not – and Jews stems from what they perceive as the Jewish ability to rebuild after great suffering.

There is still the problem with Rwandan perception of Jews when discussing shared histories. The question is who and what they consider a ‘Jew’ to be in general. There is little differentiation between various Jewish groups, and the population is seen at times as either more of a mono-ethnic group or a religious identity. Much of the time the term is used to describe the experiences of European Ashkenazi Jews. Several authors have already explored the question of what is considered the ‘Jewish’ identity, including the aforementioned Herman (1977), Hart (2000), Katz et al. (2019), Yadgar (2011), and Waxman (2010).
The divisions between practicing Jews, whether observant, secular, or somewhere in between, alongside different historical geographical groups such as the Sephardic, Ashkenazi, and Mizrahi are often unknown to Rwandans. Rather, they perceive Jews as a single ethno-religious identity. The introduction in the spring of 2019 of a Chabad house, which is a centre promoting Jewish religious engagement following the Lubavitch sect within the very religious observance of Orthodoxy, also problematises the understanding of diversity within Jewish practices. Rwandans who visited the Chabad centre during religious events such as the holidays of Sukkot, Simchat Torah, and Hannukah were only exposed to a small section of Jewish practices that the majority of Jews do not observe. Nevertheless, the exposure enforces the belief that all or at the very least most Jews believe in and engage with the type of Judaism found in the Chabad house. The generalisation of Jews as a single identity follows the postgenocide Rwandan identity formation that categories all Rwandans as a single ethnic group.

2.2 Reconstruction since Genocide

Alongside the identity of shared historical hardships, Rwandans would often discuss and idealise emulating Jewish revival after experiencing great suffering. An illustration of this belief occurred during a 2012 group meeting of genocide survivors, the Association des Etudiants Et Éleves Rescapés Du Genocide, during which I was often introduced prior to the meeting commencing in terms of my religious identity. When I asked the person who invited me to the meeting why I was being introduced based on my religious identity, he responded by stating that my Jewish identity would play an important role in personally connecting with the Rwandan survivors. My religious practice or heritage as a Sephardic, Ashkenazi, or Mizrahi Jew mattered little because the overall identity as a ‘Jew’ preceded all understanding of the complex religious-ethnic divisions and identities within the Jewish community. Only once the programme began did I realise the true extent of the importance of my Jewish identity to these genocide survivors. The meeting officially began when a member (Rwandan E) announced my religious identity to the audience: ‘We have a Jewish brother here. He not only shares our pain and identity as a persecuted people but he contains a way forward for us. The Jews always move forward and we must too’.4

The meeting continued to describe the importance for Rwandan survivors to foster good relations with Jews since they were case studies to show that revival is possible despite suffering genocide. His description included an important Rwandan perception of Jews regarding how the reconstruction of society after persecution is seemingly ingrained in the Jewish psyche. My
participation in the meeting was important since I, but more importantly as a part of the ‘Jewish people’, illustrated the ability to prosper and rebound after great suffering and loss. These survivors’ idolisation of myself and my ethno-religious background not only included Jewish revival after the Holocaust, but what many perceive as a constant threat of suffering and persecution, specifically in the European Ashkenazi Jewish history. This quality is not only admired but is also seen as a characteristic that should be incorporated into the Rwandan psyche. A government informant (Rwandan F) commented on this theme:

Jewish history follows similar to our [Rwandan] history. But they [Jews] always rebuild themselves somehow. They were kicked out of their homeland [70 ACE], survived persecutions in Europe, were kicked out of Spain [1492 ACE], there were pogroms in Russia [19th century], and then the Holocaust! But after 2,000 years, they are still here. They continue to exist and thrive in science, medicine, literature, and so on. How could they do that, but we [Rwandans] cannot? We can, they can teach us! Look at Israel: Jews have returned and made a miracle in the sand [Middle East].

This quote illustrates how Jews can be seen as a role model group for Rwandan aspiration in its development after the 1994 genocide. Within the context of this quote, there is a hint of not perceiving Jews as a single ethnic identity by including Sephardic Jewish history with the Iberian Inquisition. However, largely absent are other experiences by different Jewish groups. Additionally, we can question if the informant grasped the diversity of Jewish experiences and how they impacted different Jewish groups, or if they just listed Jewish moments of persecution. Once again, Jewish identity is not seen through a religious practice but as a single ethnic identity and thus all Jews were assumed to have experienced the same hardships over the course of the last 2,000 years. This is problematic since different Jewish groups experienced different persecutions. Nevertheless, the unified identity of a ‘Jew’ provided the Rwandans, specifically Rwandan Tutsis, with a case example for their own survival and rebuilding efforts after the genocide.

This desire for reconstruction is a common theme within Rwanda’s post-genocide reconstruction and continues with the government’s determination for social and economic development, as seen in its economic development strategies. Much of Rwandan rebuilding resides in multiple different aspects of rebuilding society through social and economic reconstruction. The ideology of agaciro, which promotes an identity of self-reliance for individual and nationwide growth, is found within Rwanda’s development (Behuria 2016; Pells,
Pontalti, and Williams 2014). At a general level, the two identities of *agaciro* and aspirations to replicate various experiences of Jewish revival do not contradict each other. Rather, the *agaciro* identity is seen as the ‘homegrown’ solution to how Rwandans can have their own reconstruction that is similar to that of the Jews. However, the same could not be said, utilising homegrown mechanisms to combat challenges, until the formation of the Israeli identity within the early twentieth century. Rwandan idealisations of replicating Jewish revival provide the motivation that it is possible for a people to rebuild after genocide. Government officials often connect their desire for Rwandan macroeconomic development to Jewish and Israeli development after the Holocaust. They perceived that Jewish cultural identity as consisting of the population’s ability to reconstruct itself for the betterment of both survivors and new generations.

On 1 April 2019, Israeli opened its first embassy in Rwanda. Its ambassador, Ron Adam, had previously presented his diplomatic credentials to Rwandan President Paul Kagame on 21 February (The *Jerusalem Post* Staff 2019). One of the requests from the newly established embassy was the opening of a Jewish centre, the aforementioned Chabad house. Opened for Passover on 19 April 2019 by Rabbi Chaim Bar Sela and his wife, the centre is part of the Lubavitch movement of Orthodox Haredi Judaism to spur Jewish engagement and education. While Chabad houses often contain a synagogue, they differ from typical synagogues by serving as the home of the rabbi, organising kosher meals, and being the centre for the Jewish community wherever they are. While the movement engages with all types of Jews, they are fundamentally an Orthodox section within the religion that does not represent or follow other levels of religious practice, let alone non-Ashkenazi customs.

The Chabad centre’s introduction in Kigali, originally within the neighbourhood of Kibagabaga until it moved to Kiyovu in early 2020, sparked interest in Rwandans about the religious aspects of Jews. During two research trips from August to November 2019 and again in early 2020, multiple Rwandans were eager to discuss the opening of the centre, which they perceived as a Jewish version of a church. The centre’s opening became the first vessel for Judaism to be taught and experienced by Rwandans as news articles in the Rwanda *New Times* (Kuteesa 2019) attempted to provide an overall description of Judaism. Its opening had a far-reaching impact in Kigali. For example, one worker (Rwandan J) at a restaurant in the Kigali neighbourhood of Kanombe asked me to bring them to the ‘Jewish church’ in order to experience a Jewish service after reading the article in the local Kinyarwanda language.7 His request led to roughly two dozen other people at the restaurant asking if they could also experience a Jewish religious service. This was not a unique experience; Rwandans in other parts of the city such as the primary market, Kimironko
market, the Kigali Genocide Memorial, and the Muslim neighbourhood of Nyamirambo also stopped me to ask if I could bring them to the new centre. While religious services at the Chabad house were typically attended by Jews either working in or visiting Rwanda, the holidays witnessed Rwandans joining in the service’s experience. Many became fascinated by the Jewish practice during various holidays such as Simchat Torah, Sukkot, and Purim. These were typically Rwandans who knew Jews residing in Rwanda and had asked to attend. Rwandans who came to experience these events did so to better understand Jewish religious practices that were beyond their understanding of Jews as an ethnic group.

What was perhaps most interesting was how these Rwandans connected Jewish religious practice with their own traditions. The most common similarity was of the mixture of milk and meat. Within Jewish law, the mixture of the two are prohibited based on text from the Book of Exodus (23:19 and 34:26) and Deuteronomy (14:21). One Rwandan genocide survivor, Pasa Mwenenganucye, attended a dinner after the Tish’a B’Av fast and asked the rabbi and other Jews in attendance questions about various religious customs. He quickly noticed similarities between the kosher dietary rules and precolonial traditions forbidding the mixture of meat and milk. Other Rwandans such as Freddy Mutanguha, the director of the Aegis Trust in Rwanda that operates the Kigali Genocide Memorial, discussed how the forbidden mixture raised a question of whether there was a link between Rwandan culture and Judaism. However, Rwassamirera (Byumvuhore 2017) discusses how the mixture of meat and milk was prohibited within traditional Rwandan culture because locals believed that if ‘milk and meat were taken simultaneously, the cow would be affected’. These religious services only provide a portrait of Jewish religious practice following a strict interpretation of Haredi Orthodox Judaism. This example compounds the problem of Rwandans not understanding the diversity within Jewish identity, with this case of religious observance.

3 The Policy Effects of Perception on Rwandan-Israeli Relations

The Rwandan desire to replicate Jewish revival after great tragedy can be seen in public policy that intends to deepen relations between Rwanda and the only Jewish majority country, Israel. Relating Jews to Israel can be viewed as controversial since not all Jews identify with the political state of Israel (Ben-Moshe and Segev 2007; Mittelberg 1994; Bergh 2014). Bar-On (2008), Bar-Tal and Teichman (2005), as well as Jaspal and Yampolsky (2011) observe that even within Israel there are different ethno-cultural divides within society that
make it difficult to combine Jewish identity into one identity. Rwandan informants often simplify the complex ethno-political identity of Jews. One retired Rwandan military official (Rwandan G) commented to me during a conversation about Rwandan-Israeli military relations that:

As a Jew [referring to the author] your homeland is Israel. It is said in the Bible that God chose Israel for the Jews forever. You can be an American or Rwandan or whatever, but as a Jew you will always have Israel as your homeland. You can't separate those two things [identities].

For him, my Jewish identity, which did not differentiate between various religious traditions, practices, or heritages, tied me to Israel, even if I did not identify as a Zionist or Israeli. For him, as well as many other informants, Jewish identity and Israel are often combined. Despite organisations such as the Kigali Genocide Memorial having close ties with Jewish organisations such as the Shoah Foundation (USC Shoah Foundation, 2018), much of the government’s association with Jews consists of its diplomatic relationship with Israel, with some minor exceptions such as the aforementioned genocide commemoration speech given by Rabbi Botech.

Since the reestablishment of diplomatic ties in 1994 between the two nations and the start of bilateral development aid flows in 1995 (Hintjens 2008), these relations continue to grow. During a March 2015 cabinet meeting, President Paul Kagame announced the opening of a Rwandan embassy in Tel Aviv, with Colonel Joseph Rutabana named as ambassador (Karuhanga 2015). The diplomatic relations between the two states provides a unique political opportunity for the RPF to secure its own identity within the international community. Reyntjens describes Rwanda-Israel relations as stemming from the Rwandan government’s aim to replicate Israel’s ability to ‘maintain victim status’ as a political tool in its foreign affairs. Israeli use of the Holocaust to deflect international criticism of policies against Palestinians is similar to Rwanda’s own use of international guilt for not preventing or stopping the 1994 genocide, a policy mechanism as a deflection of domestic and regional human rights violations (Reyntjens 2004). However, the complex relationship consists more of Rwandan officials perceiving Israel as a case model for postgenocide reconstruction than for how to exploit international guilt.

The reasons why Rwandan foreign policies appear to be more favourable toward Israel are Rwandan officials’ desire to learn from Israel’s development and to attract Israeli private investment rather than a connection to Jews or Judaism. The political dynamics of the relationship can best be seen during the 2017 American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) conference in
Washington DC, when President Kagame became the first African leader to present at the largely pro-Israel lobby group (Clark 2017). His presentation included a conversation with former CNN anchor Frank Sesno. President Kagame focused his comments on security issues, but was also asked how Israel could be a case study for Rwanda’s own development. He responded with two important comments:

So we [Rwandans] think there are lessons to be learned here and that if people are determined, focused, and it’s about their survival, I think there are not going to be any limits as to how they can go to defend and to develop themselves…. Single-mindedness about survival, about what needs to be done that the people invest in starting with the people and the quality of that investment in terms of building capacities that we develop in a society as well as each other, they have the capacity to protect themselves.

AIPAC 2017

The themes of similar historical experiences as well as an idealisation regarding replicating Israeli development are found within President Kagame’s description of Israel’s investment in social and physical infrastructure. This was not the first time President Kagame had spoken favourably about Israel; he had previously had a meeting with former Israeli president Simon Peres in 2003 (Hintjens 2008). To attract Israeli private investors to visit and invest in Rwanda, President Kagame is attempting to construct Rwanda’s identity for an Israeli audience that illustrates shared history, beliefs, and norms (Fierke 2010; Hopf 1998). Utilising the constructivist concepts of Weldes (1996), Adler (1997), and Wendt (Ross 2006; Wendt 1992, 1994, 1995) on the importance of identity within the construct of how actors engage and operate within the international system can provide useful insights into President Kagame’s comments. His comments at AIPAC illustrate an attempt by the Rwandan Government to attract Israelis, whether the targeted audience is the government, businesses, or the population at large, to engage with Rwanda. It is worth noting that not all Rwandan policy makers and political officials agree with the nation’s developing relations with Israel because of Israeli’s human rights record with the Palestinians (Beloff 2015). There is additional controversy due to claims made about Israel forcibly sending thousands of Sudanese and Eritrean refugees to Rwanda in return for an unknown financial deal (Al Jazeera 2017). However, Ambassador Olivier Nduhungirehe, the former Rwandan minister of state from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation, denied these claims (Haaretz 2018). Nevertheless, Rwandan foreign policy aims for closer economic ties with Israel.
Much of the macroeconomic policy for development, specifically Vision 2020, focuses on ICT development and the modernisation of agriculture. The Rwandan government views ICT sector growth as a supplementary stage, replacing industrialisation in terms of economic development (Crisafulli and Redmond 2012). Many in the Rwandan Government perceive Israel as a strategic economic partner in developing these sectors. Rwandan officials have studied Israel’s development in this field and believe that Rwanda can, to some extent, duplicate their success for the nation’s own development (Jervis, 1976, 232). Israel’s development of its technology sector rivals Silicon Valley in the United States in developing new computer software and hardware. It is interesting to note how importantly Rwanda perceives Israeli’s identity as a leader in ICT development. As one example of this perceived identity, a Rwandan bureaucrat (Rwandan H) within the Rwanda Development Board (RDB) asked if I had read the book Start-up Nation: The Story of Israel’s Economic Miracle (Senor and Singer, 2009). I replied that I was unaware of the book. He responded that the book shows how any nation such as Rwanda can become a leader in ICT development if it follows strategies similar to Israel. This level of idealisation is found in many Rwandans’ perception of Israeli culture, and fosters technological innovation with businesses increasingly wanting to establish partnerships with Israeli technological businesses. These civil servants are not alone in praising Israel’s technological development; many Rwanda Defence Force (RDF) officials also praise Israel. Rwandan G commented, ‘I have been to Israel so many times and am always impressed by their command of technology and how they have grown their economy based on it.’

In addition to technological development, Vision 2020 focuses on the important agricultural sector (Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning 2012). Agriculture still composes the majority of development despite the nation facing a serious problem of land scarcity. An estimated 70 percent of Rwandan labourers work in agriculture, most of which is subsistence agriculture. Total agricultural production composes 30 percent of gross domestic product (The World Bank 2018). The Rwandan government is attempting to use Israeli innovation in farming and cultivation to help Rwandan agricultural production. Many Rwandan officials mentioned this agricultural relationship, with one informant specifically commenting: ‘Israel was nothing but a desert when the Jews started building their homeland in the 1940s. But they turned it into a beautiful garden and even export some of their fruits around the world. Here we need to learn their [Israel’s] ways so Rwandans are always fed.’ Not only does he credit Israel for its agricultural development, he illustrates the perceived connection of Israeli and Jewish identity. Additionally, he relates Rwanda’s need to increase farming production to Israel’s perceived agricultural success.
One Rwandan who visited Israel in 2007 went to see a kibbutz, which is a collective community predominantly focused on agricultural development (Gavron 2000; Rifkin 2010). He decided to attempt to form his own, thirty-five miles south of the Rwandan capital city of Kigali. When asked why he created the kibbutz, he responded:

I remember the first time seeing it in Israel. It was so incredible how people were working together and what they were producing. I wanted to bring this back home so we can work together toward reconciliation and use some of the techniques I saw in Israel for more crops.14

The Rwandan government works with Israeli agricultural agencies to learn new and better farming and cultivation practices. One example is the relationship between Rwanda and the Israeli Agency for International Development Cooperation (MASHAV). In late 2014 it established a horticulture centre to assist Rwanda in its agricultural techniques in order to increase food production for local consumption and export (Tumwebaze 2014a, 2014c). During a 2014 visit to Israel, former Rwanda foreign minister Louise Mushikiwabo met with Rwandan students participating in the Agro Studies International Centre for agricultural interns. This programme in Israel is designed to train students in better mechanisms that will result in greater farming production yields. In particular, Rwandan students learn new and efficient ways to enhance production of vegetables and fruits, with a focus on soil conservation, irrigation techniques, planting and harvesting mechanisms, as well as using computer technologies to predict crop yields (Bucyensenge 2014; Tumwebaze 2014b). She told the students: ‘I want to urge you to take advantage of the skills you have acquired to develop agriculture and agri-business back home, taking the example of Israel’ (Tumwebaze 2014a). Her comment illustrates that beyond ICT development, Israel can provide needed training for Rwandan agricultural development.

Despite the Rwandan government’s attempts to connect with what they perceive as the most singular Jewish actor, Israel, to construct a specific identity that they hope will appeal to Jewish and Israeli audiences, there is the issue of generalisation of Jews. This identity includes themes of shared historical suffering and aspirations to idolise Jewish development since the Holocaust, yet this was mainly experienced by Ashkenazi Jews since other Jewish groups experienced different types of historical persecution. While genocide commemorations and remembrance discuss the Holocaust, another aspect many Rwandan government officials, bureaucrats, and nongovernment informants often comment on is the shared identity between the two nations as a primary basis for diplomatic relations (Campbell 2002; Mitzen 2006). This identity has
even shifted to include nongenocide similarities such as a pro-Israel stance through participation in AIPAC conferences, as well as security and defence (Beloff 2015). These shared identities and beliefs rather than Judaism or the Jewish people are what is important to the Rwandan government. If they are interpreted as Rwanda wishes for them to be understood (Reus-Smit 2013), it will justify Israeli engagement in helping rebuild the nation through foreign direct investment in Rwanda’s industries, including the ICT industry and advancements in agricultural production. While the positive perception of Jews and Judaism may exist within the Rwandan population, or at least with those I engaged with in Kigali, it does not seem to have influenced Rwandan foreign policy with Israel compared to another developed state. Even the depiction of Israel on televised commercials for the state-backed RwandAir provides a vague description of Jewish identity and connection to Israel. The commercial depicts a father and son discussing a tallit, a Jewish prayer shawl, which he purchased on a trip to Israel and how the Star of David represents Judaism. For many Rwandans this commercial is perhaps their only visualisation of Judaism and Israel. For example, the same positive foreign engagement with Israel is akin to that with Singapore, which is also touted as a case study for Rwandan development (Caryl 2015).

4 Conclusion

Much of the examination of Rwanda’s relationship with religions typically focuses on the role of Christianity in crafting ethnic divisions, hatred, and genocide. Discussion of Judaism is typically absent from the scholarly literature since there has been no real Jewish exposure within Rwandan history. The 1994 genocide began to shift this narrative, with the genocide being compared to the Holocaust. Within scholarly circles debates on this topic resulted in a division, with some supporting and others dismissing the comparison. Within Rwanda the Holocaust became a mechanism to better understand what had happened in their own country. As mentioned by Informant D, learning about the Holocaust helped him feel less alone and to realize that others have suffered similar horrors. Very importantly, it showed that it was possible to rebuild. Jews became a symbolic people who were idealised for their ability to rebuild, not only after the Holocaust but from centuries of persecution. Thus the comparison became one of shared historical pain rather than an attempt to directly compare the two genocides.

The comparison of Rwandans to Jews is complicated and incomplete. Most informants provided a Rwandan identity within the guidelines of the
government in order to prevent any claims against them of fostering divisionism. Informants would rarely admit that their description of Rwandan suffering was in fact a description of Rwandan Tutsi history of persecution and suffering. Many identified their past suffering to that of the Jewish suffering of persecution and the Holocaust. The issue of Rwandan identity can also be found in Rwandan perceptions of who and what is a ‘Jew’. Many perceive Jews as a single ethno-religious identity with very little understanding of the diversity within the global Jewish community. The recent opening of the Chabad centre has been important in teaching some Rwandans the religious practices found within Judaism. However, it has also aided in fostering a single Jewish identity. While a majority of Jews are not Orthodox in their religious practice, the religious events conducted by the centre give the impression that all Jews are deeply religious.

In addition to the identity of historical suffering, Rwandans want to share their aspirations and idolisation of the Jewish ability to rebuild. Many Rwandans commented on how Jewish reconstruction in terms of the political creation and economic development of Israel is seen as something for Rwandans to aspire to within their own country. Reyntjens questions the true intention of this political relationship. Rather than sharing past suffering, the two states may only be sharing mechanisms to deflect international criticism of human rights violations. However, Rwandans claim that Israel provides an illustration of the possibility for a victim population to go beyond that identification of suffering and grow into a developed nation. This belief explains why Rwanda continues to improve its diplomatic and economic relations with Israel. Built on shared history, for many within the Rwandan government Israel provides the case study of successful development. Rwandan foreign relations continue to grow and are benefitting Rwanda’s own economic growth through investment and training in ICT and agricultural production. Rwanda’s relationship with Israel and Jews in general will continue to develop in the foreseeable future.

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### Notes

1. Interview with unnamed Rwandan A, Kigali, Rwanda, February 2013.
4. Presentation of Rwandan E at a meeting of the Association des Etudiants Et Éleves Rescapés Du Genocide, June 2012.
5. Once again, the informant used the word ‘Rwandan’, despite describing Rwandan Tutsis. When I questioned him about who he was referring to in his use of ‘Rwandan’, he insisted that it was all Rwandans.
9. Interview with Freddy Mutanguha, Kigali, Rwanda, on 12 May 2012.
11. Interview with Rwandan H, Kigali, Rwanda, June 2012.