

DYNAMICS OF DISCOURSE: POWER AND CULTURE IN PRECOLONIAL RWANDA

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ABSTRACT

Rwandan scholarship tends to look at the history of the country in terms of the well-known conflict between "Hutu" and "Tutsi" groups, sometimes re-categorizing the conflict to fit with different paradigms. This study looks to the precolonial era as a period when the distinction between "Hutu" and "Tutsi" was not a major part of social discourse. Instead, religious myth and ritual provides access to issues of power and sovereignty that were relevant to the central court and peripheral regions. Using social constructivist theories of Bruce Lincoln and Fredrik Barth, the thesis discusses Rwandan precolonial origin myths, kingship rituals, and spirit-possession cults as means whereby actors asserted and contested sovereignty. The implications of a profoundly shared culture are evident in each of these examples, which in turn disposes of any tendency to see identities of "Tutsi" and "Hutu" as being preeminent to other questions of culture and authority during this period.