

Civic education in Rwanda: the impact of the Itorero program

Abstract: The authors discuss the transformation in civic education in Rwanda. Before the arrival of the colonizers, Rwanda had traditions in education and uniting societies. Colonialism destroyed the educational system and divided the society. The re-introduction of the traditional system has been also explored – the example of the Itorero program and its impact on the unity and reconciliation efforts of the government – on the basis of various conducted studies. The main aspects that are taken into account in this study include: the significance of civic education, the Itorero program and the best predictors of success, and the role of civic education in promoting the well-being of communities and nations. The authors not only analyze the functioning of the Itorero institution, but also aim to seek answers to the questions of whether and to what extent the Itorero program affects civic education and to what extent it is an effective tool for uniting the Rwandan society.

Keywords: civic education, citizenship education, Itorero, Rwanda

Introduction

Over its history up to the present day, Sub-Saharan Africa, including the region of African Great Lakes, has been characterized by a series of, sometimes violent, intertribal and interstate conflicts. This is largely due to the nature of the local societies, but also due to the cultural dissimilarity of countries and tribes shaped in the course of historical development. Cultural diversity is an indicator of the identity of societies. The colonial period brought territorial and administrative borders that did not take into account traditional territorial, state-tribal divisions. This has resulted and still results in divisions in the societies of individual countries. These divisions were further escalated

by the colonial administration. To this day, they result in divisions and social conflicts, which in extreme cases turn into armed conflicts.

The leading problem of Sub-Saharan Africa is educating the societies of individual countries in the sphere of searching for common, tribal, and supra-ethnic cultural values. The problem also affects the region of African Great Lakes. Rwanda is a special case of conflicting societies with tribal cultural differences. The country has a long history dating back to the early Middle Ages. What has been dealt with in its history is, among other things, an initiative that is extremely important from the point of view of civic education – the Itorero program. It was implemented in the first half of the 16th century by King Ruganzu.

Currently, the Rwandan authorities attribute great importance to the elimination of the still-existing ethnic and cultural divisions and the civic education of society in the spirit of national unity and patriotism. This is mainly done by the contemporary Itorero program, referring to the idea of King Ruganzu. In 2007, while striving to reconcile the feuding ethnic groups and searching for common cultural values of the society, the implementation of the Itorero program, rooted in the country's tradition, began.

It should be emphasized that the society of Rwanda was in conflict during the colonial period due to the policy of the Belgians based on opposing individual social groups. The conflict was fueled after gaining independence by both the country's political leaders and international factors. After 1994, the Rwandan authorities adopted the unification of society through civic education as a priority goal, in which intercultural education plays an important role.

Intercultural education in the Rwandan society is related to the issue of reconciliation and building national unity, which take into account social and state self-identification. The goal of education is a sense of national awareness considered superior to tribal affiliation. It aims to shape the sense of national identity as superior to tribal affiliation.

The process of civic education in Rwanda is carried out through the implementation of a series of initiatives aimed at uniting the antagonized society. One of the first was the "Ingando Solidarity Camp" program, which served to shape the desired civic qualities and the sense of being Rwandan. Another long-term program covering the whole society, especially children and youth, is the Itorero program.

The article aims to seek answers to the questions of whether and to what extent the Itorero program affects civic education and to what extent it is an effective tool for uniting the nation of this country.

Methods and research procedures

Preparing to solve the research problem formulated in the title, the authors adopted the following research procedure:

- after the initial formulation of the topic, purpose, research questions, and structure of the article, the general methodological assumptions of the article were defined;
- in the course of the discussion, they selected and analyzed some scientific studies on the explored subject matter and conducted an ongoing discussion on the considered issues in terms of their use in the article;
- on the basis of specific methodological assumptions, using the content comprised in the literature on the subject, a series of interviews and discussions was conducted among academic teachers and students of two Rwandan universities. The University of Technology and Arts of Byumba (UTAB) in Byumba is technical and agricultural. The Protestant Institute of Art of Social Sciences (PIASS) in Butare is a university representing social sciences.

Due to the specificity of Rwanda's socio-political landscape, the country's authorities in many cases do not publish detailed results of the implemented social programs. As a principle, they are limited to the mass dissemination of theoretical assumptions as well as techniques and tools for implementing these programs. The same applies to the Itorero program. The inclusion of students into the study by the authors' team guarantees (to a high degree) the possibility of tracking the process of educating the society and its effects. On the other hand, the political reality in Rwanda means that society is not used to openly expressing itself as regards socio-political issues. Therefore, in the course of the research, the authors ensured full anonymity of the respondents' statements, both oral and written ones. The authors made every effort to ensure that the students and academic teachers involved in the research were randomly selected. No importance was attributed to specific fields of study. The material collected in the course of empirical research consists of oral and written statements from about 60 academic teachers and about 200 students from both universities. This study includes those research results that were most often repeated in the statements, with which the majority of people participating in the debates agreed or which were confirmed by the statistics of the collected surveys. In the opinion of the authors, they constitute sufficient research material, which, together with the literature on the subject, was used to solve the scientific problem raised in this article.

In the methodological sphere, it was assumed that the use of a case study would be particularly useful in achieving the research goal. The object of study was the society of Rwanda. Since the examined object is internally complex and heterogeneous, it was necessary to use techniques for collecting and applying data, which, using the monographic method, had the character of qualitative approaches. They gave a fairly comprehensive picture of the assessment of the impact of the Itorero program on the process of uniting the Rwandan society.

The authors used the research techniques involving the analysis and criticism of the expert literature, but — above all — primary sources in the form of recorded interviews and statements in the course of discussions with academic teachers and university students. At the final stage of the work, the authors used some forms of thought processes in the form of analysis and synthesis of the statements collected during the research and inductive reasoning.

The implementation of successive government programs can significantly contribute to building national reconciliation and to eliminating social divisions. Some researchers believe that by changing the configuration of collective memory, the conditions for reconciliation can be created, in which education plays a leading role.

Rwandan civic education

Civic education is an important element in nation-building, as well as in developing the character of the youth as the future generation of leaders in Rwanda. Bailey defined citizenship as "the membership of, and participation in the activities of a community or group communities" (Bailey, 1998, p. 14).

Civic education is an important responsibility of schools. The consensus still exists that it is the school's responsibility to prepare students to be active and informed democratic citizens (Elam, Rose, 1996). With today's technological advances, young people use social media for civic engagement (CIRCLE, 2021). Most of us have largely neglected the fact how civic education can support youth's civic participation via social media by favoring more traditional approaches to civic education.

Before the arrival of the colonizers, Rwanda and Burundi had beautiful traditions on education and in uniting their societies. Itorero is a good ex-

ample. In the pre-colonial period, in the kingdom of King Ruganzu, two institutions were established as pillars of his power: Itorero and Ubuhake. Itorero was a training system (Byanafashe and Rutayisire, 2016, p. 90).

Education at Itorero was a formal training in Rwanda's rich pre-colonial political culture. Each new king trained a new army to defend the nation. The recruits, known as "Intore", underwent long-term sport and military training at the royal court. They also learned the art of dance, rhetoric, poetry, and perseverance. Another goal was also to acquire the qualities of generosity, tolerance, and courage (Byanafashe and Rutayisire, 2016, p. 142). Thus, it must be said that Rwanda's culture was already rich in the pre-colonial period. Its pillar was the study of patriotism and civic education. These principles lay the foundation for building a united, strong state even before the arrival of the first Europeans.

During the colonial period, Germany adopted a system of indirect government, limiting interference in the affairs of local societies and local rulers to the most important matters. The power of the colonizers was symbolic for a long time (Bar, 2013, p. 48). The first contacts of the colonial administration with the local people of Rwanda and Burundi were somewhat reminiscent of the Portuguese colonization in Congo. The local society was divided. Some were against the invaders, while others cooperated. The Germans struggled in particular with the lack of qualified office staff and the lack of financial resources. This resulted in their limited power in the colony. Nevertheless, local leaders were used and the educational system was interfered with.

It should be noted that it was the German colonizers who laid the foundations for the construction of the Hamit myth in the region of African Great Lakes. German researchers – Africanists, revised both the existing classifications of languages and their origin on the continent. As a result of these works, Carl Meinhof, following his racist theory that divided societies in terms of anthropology, created an independent family of Hamitic languages. (Piłasiewicz and Rzewuski, 2005, pp. 34–37). At the same time, the colonial administration favored the Tutsi ethnic group, which led to its strengthening in the sphere of local government (Check, 2015, pp. 231–235). This affected the educational system and had important consequences in the further stages of the Belgian colonization in the region.

Taking over the management of the colonies by the Belgian government did not mean any significant changes in the internal policy pursued in the colonies. It was reduced to the exclusion of the majority of the native population from political, economic, and social life. Indeed, the extermination on the same scale as it had taken place during the reign of Leopold II was

stopped, but the economic goal remained unchanged – the exploitation of natural resources and of the local population. Belgians managed the colonies in a more sophisticated way, "in white gloves". By initiating antagonisms between tribes, they pursued a policy of dividing societies. Some tribal chiefs collaborated with the Belgian administration, seeing it as a benefit both for their subjects and for themselves. Others resisted. Under the decree of May 2nd, 1910, the traditional chiefs were recognized by the government administration in the Belgian Congo, and in 1912 they were given further powers of maintaining order and collecting taxes in their territories (Battory and Vircoulon, 2020). Gaining authority by the chiefs was not easy. The subordinated population to a large extent considered them collaborators. By contrast, the Belgian administration had limited confidence in the indigenous peoples. The lack of trust in the chiefs, but also the lack of their skills of fulfilling the imposed tasks, resulted in the creation (by the colonists) of a system of possibly full control. For this purpose, among other things, customary courts have been established. They included rural areas and neighborhoods inhabited by indigenous peoples in urban areas. As a rule, the courts applied customary law as long as it did not conflict with the law and public order established by the colonial administration.

In Rwanda and Burundi, Belgians exercised power through local leaders, thereby maintaining the former political and social structure in which the Tutsis had long held a privileged position while discriminating the Hutus. Identity cards with a record of ethnicity were introduced. The policy towards the society was caused by racism. The changes took place just before the liberation. In fear of losing their rule, the Belgians suddenly began favoring the Hutu.

This policy of division was dominant in the educational system at the time. Through "propaganda" education in the missions, efforts were made to keep control over the local population. During the colonial period, education was based on the science of division and racism. It was the Belgian rule that left the greatest mark on the mentality of the inhabitants of the WJA region. Ethnic manipulation and the introduction into political practice of pseudoscientific theories that recognize the superiority of some over others turned out to be destructive for the societies of the entire region. The colonizers were guided by the principle that better injustice than any violation of the established order.

After the genocide, reconstruction, social cohesion, and peace-building were given top priority by the new government. In the field of education,

the issue of citizenship played a major role. (Nzahabwanayo, 2018). Davies pointed out that citizenship education is a crucial facet of reconstruction in post-conflict societies (Davies, 2005, pp.17–13).

For this reason, today the government of Rwanda refers to the pre-colonial traditional culture of unity. Today, the national motto in Rwanda is unity, work, love, and the state. Thus, nowadays the term "state-appropriate education" means: providing education that is appropriate for the state. The aim of this education is the pride, love, and respect for the state, and the building, strengthening, and maintaining of citizens' knowledge about the state (Republika Y'u Rwanda, Komisiyo y'igihugu y'itorebo, Ubutore Development Centre 2014, p. 2) The pillars of civic education include history, culture, national values, and the vision of the state (ibidem). Effective citizenship education in Rwanda leads to unity, community, national pride, stability, and development.

In the case of Rwanda, the principles and canons of the local political culture are set out in the Value and Love for the Country Training Guide issued by the National Church Commission and the Electoral Development Center (ibidem, pp. 50-62).

It contains the canon of national patriotism and refers to the linguistic and cultural community of the nation and the state. According to the guidebook, the Rwandan culture is a legacy left by ancestors. The society has a sense of its own identity that sets it apart from other nations (ibidem). The representatives of Rwandan political parties emphasize that the political culture is built mainly on the values derived from the pre-colonial culture and on a specific type of analysis and interpretation of the events in 1994.

For contemporary Rwandans, citizenship education is teaching and activity aimed at creating a better Rwanda. Learning is about popularizing the content of Rwandan people's equal rights, their culture of simplicity, peace, mutual respect, love for the state, and truth. This method of education is being implemented by the government of President Paul Kagame (statement by a participant in the debate on 15th December, 2018).

"Itorero program" - a case study

Since the launch of the Itorero program, its content and the vision of its impact on society have remained the same. However, the number of people covered by the program and the range of its impact are increasing.

In addition, an important element of civic education is learning the pride and respect for the state, learning to be Rwandan. Particular attention should be paid here to the perception of international relations and foreign cooperation. Civic education teaches that Rwandans are to demand from others equal treatment, respect, and cooperation on an equal footing (Statement by a participant in the debate on 15th December, 2018).

A contemporary example of the government's reference to the pre-colonial tradition is the Itorero program. The Government of Rwanda (GoR), during its 12th of November 2007 cabinet meeting, decided to revive its traditional civil education program - "Itorero" - to enable Rwandans to reacquaint themselves with the values and taboos of their culture (NIC, 2012). The program was officially launched on the 16th of November 2007, and in 2013 was presided over by the National *Itorero* Commission (NIC), compliantly with Law N° 41/2013 determining its mission, organization, and functioning. The objective of *Itorero* consists in: "Bringing up a patriotic Rwandan who has values and taboos of the Rwandan culture and who has the culture of *Intore*". The program is compulsory for all students. The scheme designed for this category comprises two phases: (i) the theoretical phase called Gutozwa (getting trained) involving moral, political, and cultural education which lasts three months; and (ii) the practical phase named *Urugerero* (a camp) in the form of national service or volunteering service that lasts seven months (NIC, 2012).

Civic education is an ongoing process of teaching and sharing cultural values mostly for post-genocide governance. The Itorero citizenship education program is one of the government's initiatives to train Rwandans into becoming patriotic citizens and engage in the country's development process. It should be emphasized that civic education is an important element in building the unity of the nation, as well as in shaping the sense of identity and patriotic attitudes of young people. In the centuries-long process of state development, Rwanda has formed cultural traditions that served to unite society. Nowadays, politicians refer to these values by using them in the process of civic education, the overarching goal of which is to build unity and shape the sense of national identity in the society.

The Itorero program is an effective tool for civic education. It shapes the sense of national identity and citizens' duties towards the state and society. It develops the desirable features of patriotism. It is undoubtedly the greatest and extremely effective tool for cultural education in the Rwandan society. In the course of the research, the authors raised the question: What is Itorero for Rwandans? Most of the respondents answered: "A traditional cultural institution plays an important role in promoting values such as the unity

of our nation," "It is a civic education program. The guiding values are the education of cultural traditions and training," and "Traditionally, Itorero has been a center for leadership training. Nowadays, it is a program of learning the language, dance, songs, traditions of Rwanda and a program of learning leadership and patriotism," "Itorero promotes the values of patriotism," "The program accelerated the reconstruction of the Rwandan nation after the Tutsi genocide of 1994" (debate held on 18th December, 2018).

When asked how Itorero's values affect the everyday life of Rwandans, most of the respondents answered: "Itorero promotes the values of unity and reconstruction among Rwandans. The aim is to convey the value of respect to authorities and their leaders and to instill common work without ethnic divisions, a common sense of responsibility of the whole society for the development of Rwanda", "Itorero strengthens unity, solidarity, respect, discipline, patriotism and a sense of national identity" (statements collected on 3rd November, 2022).

When asked whether and how Itorero unites the nation, all the respondents replied that the program plays an important role in uniting the nation: "It promotes the values of unity, respect for authority and leadership", "The program is designed to instill Rwandans' collective work and responsibility", "The program promotes common values of solidarity, unity and national identity" "The program aims to instill the values of helping the elderly", "It mobilizes Rwandans to cherish traditional cultural values and understand the importance of unity", "It teaches love for the nation", "The program helped unify and rebuild the country after the 1994 Tutsi genocide" (statements collected on 3rd November, 2022).

Being asked what has changed in the country thanks to Itorero, most respondents answered: "The united nation, the instillation of values of unity, reconciliation and leadership protection led to unity, and working together led to economic development". "People's cooperation has increased", "The awareness of Rwanda's traditions, learning about history and cultural traditions has increased", "All Rwandans work together to develop their country", "The program brought closer the values of working together and these led to the development of the country" (statements collected on 18th December, 2018).

When asked whether the Itorero program provides military training and what is the purpose of the training, the respondents gave extremely different answers. Some claimed that such training existed, others that it did not. However, the vast majority confirmed that military training is organized as

part of the program. The respondents replied: "The purpose of military training is to instill discipline, patriotism, a sense of duty, and unity among Rwandans", "In the tradition of Rwanda, this program included a military element in the form of practical training. Traditionally, the Itorero has been used as a training platform for warriors and leaders in the Rwandan society. Military training was accompanied by civic education on culture, traditions, social norms, values, and civic responsibility", "The Itorero program does not provide military training. Its primary goal is not to focus on the military but on civic education and culture", "The Itorero program provides military training to ensure the security of the country, "The program does not provide military training. The goal is to learn cultural values and discipline," "The Itorero program provides military training to strengthen state security", "The Itorero program does not provide military training. It aims to present cultural values and teach national identity, discipline, and patriotism, "The program sometimes includes military training. The goal is to protect the public. Thanks to Itorero, Rwandans can protect what they have, "The goal is to develop the culture of Rwanda, to build solidarity," "The purpose of military training is to protect the country, "Military training is important. If by chance we are at war with another country, thanks to the training we will be able to defend our homeland" (statements collected on 3rd November, 2022).

For Rwandans, "Itorero" is a civic education institution whose main purpose is to teach the preservation of their culture through its various values such as national unity, social solidarity, patriotism, honesty, courage, tolerance, the society's dos and don'ts, etc. Through this instrument, Rwandans are kept informed about government policies and programs that aim to promote the importance and role of the society in the implementation of these socioeconomic development programs (statements collected on 3rd November, 2022).

The authors' research shows that the process of civic education, especially the Itorero program, covered the entire society. There are many indications that Itorero will continue to be the main tool for educating and shaping civic attitudes in the Rwandan society, especially among children and youth. The program is a government priority and is constantly developing. This state of affairs is confirmed by the Rwanda Statistical Year Book of 2018. It shows an increase in the access to education and the number of learners and university students is systematically increasing (https://www.statistics.gov.rw/publication/1918). Participation in citizenship education has also been increasing since 2007. Between 2007 and 2017, over 1,700,000 Rwandans were covered

by the Itorero program, of which 160,875 are university students (https://rwandapedia.rw/hgs/itorero/how-it-works; https://itorero.nic.gov.rw/).

The Itorero program was open to all Rwandans from the age of seven. All respondents (academic teachers and students of both universities) who were interviewed and discussed had undergone the Itorero training. There are no permanent Itorero schools. However, the program is implemented at different levels and is especially based on schools as extracurricular activities (excerpt from the interview of $13^{\rm th}$ December, 2018). The village-level Itorero consists of 6 categories that train residents according to their age: Ibirezi (Imyaka 0–5 years), Imbuto (6–12), Indirira (13–18), Indahangarwa (19–35), Ingobokarugamba (36–55) and Inararibonye (Imyaka 55 years old and more) (excerpt from an interview of $13^{\rm th}$ December 13, 2018).

Moreover, the topic of patriotism is discussed at all levels, especially as a cross-cutting issue, at the primary and secondary levels and the level of university through extracurricular activities (excerpt from an interview of 18th December, 2018). Taking into account the Education Statistical Yearbook 2021/22, approximately 4,159,782 citizens learned what patriotism is (https://www.mineduc.gov.rw/index.php?eID=dumpFile&t=f&f=70540&token=3966 9c8607fe9bcc6b5d44f46ec879a4d4bc5634).

Conclusions

The current policy of the Rwandan government is aimed at even greater public involvement in the Itorero program. It should be concluded that in the coming years the number of people covered by the program, especially among young people, will systematically increase. It is estimated that around 10 million Rwandans, including school children, have been trained under the Itorero program since its introduction.

The process of rebuilding the state and uniting ethnic groups after the genocide was not and is not a simple process. The memory of the wrong done, the desire for revenge – these feelings inherent in the majority of the society could not be eliminated overnight. The trauma and memory of these events have remained for a long time. Wound healing is a long-term process. Despite this, the Rwandans managed to bring about peace and harmonious cooperation within the state. In this case, the return to tradition and precolonial values, including the Itorero program, turned out to be extremely helpful. The joint work of the nation and sticking to the values that unite the society make it possible to effectively implement the process of rebuilding

the state. Regardless of the criticism of military training under the program, it should be emphasized that Itorero teaches discipline, working together, and caring for the values of traditional culture. This seems to be the key to Rwanda's development. The program helps Rwandans learn about their precolonial history and cultivate their traditions. It is believed that this is the most important element of civic education and building national identity. In the coming years, the program will increase national awareness, the need for unity, and joint work for the country.

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