

Church and Society: How the Church Helped Burundi to Navigate Its Historical Challenges

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Abstract

Burundi experienced recurrent armed violence for 43 years, from 1962, with dire consequences. It resulted in thousands of people losing their lives and properties, internal displacements, and others fleeing the country to neighbouring countries while others remained orphans and poor. Before the coming of Western missionaries, Burundi was arguably an organised kingdom where the king “*Umwami*,” his sons “*Abaganwa*,” and the elders/advisors “*Abashingantahe*” controlled the entire administration and management of the country. This paper argues that the conflicts in Burundi’s history were rooted in poor economic performance, ethnic tensions, and a lack of democratic principles. It explores the role played by the church during this tragic period to bring peace, social cohesion and unity. In addition, it looks at initiatives by the church to bring people together in training on trauma and healing, sensitising people to fight hatred, and promoting peace, forgiveness and reconciliation. Church leaders worked with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to bring the Christian community an awareness of their role in transforming Burundi.

Keywords: Church, Burundi, Rwanda, Hutu, Tutsi, Twa, Colonial, Civil War, Reconciliation

Introduction

Burundi is one of the East African countries that attained independence in 1962, with its new capital established at Gitega on February 4, 2019.¹ According to the United Nations data, the

¹ Law no.1/04 of 04 February 2019 establishing the Political and Economic Capital of Burundi, https://www.afdb.org/sites/default/files/documents/projects-and-operations/burundi_country_strategy_paper_2019-2023-rev.pdf (accessed January 27, 2021).



population of Burundi is estimated to be 12,959,127 as of 2023.² Historically before the colonial period, the country was under traditional kingdom rule, where the king owned both land and people and was the final decision-maker on national issues. The traditional Kingdom of Burundi had hierarchical political authority and economic exchange.³ The coming of Western missionaries and the influence of colonisers significantly impacted the whole traditional political system, resulting in negative ethnicity and social divisions based on regional, political and ethnic ideology. René Lemarchand rightly observes that ethnic violence, political assassinations and civil war marked the postcolonial period.⁴ Those divisions resulted in internal conflicts and violence since independence in the 1960s. The conflict of 1972, initiated by Hutu rebels from the DRC, has been an unforgettable tragedy in Burundi. Over 300,000 Burundians died in this incident, and 300,000 people were displaced as refugees.⁵ After this, a series of violence marked the history of Burundi up to 1993, when the democratically elected Hutu president Melchior Ndadaye was assassinated by the Tutsi military, who were against a democratic system in Burundi. This incident renewed the passion of Hutu rebels to fight the Tutsi political system.

Burundi was introduced to Christianity in 1899, and almost a century later (in 1990), Christians were estimated to be 151,225 out of 171,409 adult people, which means 86.2% of the population was Christian.⁶ This numerical growth of Christianity continued, and in 2022 Emmanuel Ndikumana observed that 92% of Burundians identify as Christians: 65% are Roman Catholic, 37% are Protestants, 6% practice indigenous religions, and 2% are Muslims.⁷ Looking at the thousands of people killed during the internal conflicts, the thousands of refugees scattered everywhere in the world, and the numerical growth of Christianity, I examine the church's impact on Burundi's historical challenges. Hedley John

² United Nations, "Burundi Population," *Worldometer*, July 1, 2023, <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/burundi-population/> (accessed July 10, 2023).

³ Stef Vendeginste, *Stones Left Unturned: Law and Transitional Justice in Burundi* (Antwerp-Oxford-Portland: Intersentia, 2010), 17.

⁴ René Lemarchand, *The Dynamics of Violence in Central Africa* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 141.

⁵ UNICEF-Burundi, "Conflict Analysis Summary," *Reliefweb*, July 24, 2003, <https://reliefweb.int/report/burundi/conflict-analysis-summary-burundi> (accessed July 10, 2023).

⁶ United States Embassy in Burundi, "International Religious Freedom Report", *New York Times*, May 13, 2021, <https://bi.usembassy.gov/wp-content/uploads/sites/215/BURUNDI-2021-INTERNATIONAL-RELIGIOUS-FREEDOM-REPORT-2.pdf> (accessed July 13, 2023).

⁷ Emmanuel Ndikumana, "Prayer Community," *ScholarLeader International*, May 24, 2022. <https://www.scholarleaders.org/emmanuel-ndikumana-in-burundi/#:~:text=92%25%20of%20Burundians%20identifyas,%2C%20and%20%25%20are%20Muslims> (accessed December 14, 2022).



Brooke, Numbers, and Ronald, who analysed the impact of Christianity in Western society, found that “Christianity has been intricately intertwined with the history and formation of Western society. Throughout its long history, the church has been a major source of social services like schooling and medical care; an inspiration for art, culture and philosophy; and an influential player in politics and religion.”⁸ The study investigated how the rapid numerical growth of Christianity holistically influenced the history of Burundi. The article is a library-based work looking at the history of Burundi (pre-colonial, colonial, and postcolonial eras) and how the church has shaped the history of Burundi.

Literature Review

This section presents scholarly discussions touching on the history of the traditional Kingdom of Burundi, the root causes of conflicts in Burundi, the consequences of conflicts in Burundi, the beginning of Christianity in Burundi, and the social cohesion and reconciliation initiatives by the church in Burundi.

History of the Traditional Rule in Burundi

Although some historical resources approximate the 16th century as the date of the Burundi kingdom’s foundation, the exact date remains unknown. Stef narrated that the king/ ruler (*mwami*) headed a princely aristocracy (*ganwa*) which owned most of the land and required a tribute, or tax, from local farmers (mainly Hutu) and herders (mainly Tutsi).⁹

When colonisers occupied the country in 1890, the country’s monarchy rule was subjected to Belgium’s leadership, and Burundi was appended to Rwanda and became a new nation known as Urundi. Thus, in Warren Weinstein and Robert Schreer’s work, it is noted that “Ruanda-Urundi, which consisted of modern-day Rwanda and Burundi, became a Belgian League of Nations mandate territory, with Usumbura as its capital. However, Ruanda-Urundi continued its kingship dynasty despite the presence of European authorities.”¹⁰

⁸ Hedley John Brooke, Numbers, Ronald L., *Science and Religion Around the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 71.

⁹ Self Vendeginste, 17.

¹⁰ Warren Weinstein and Robert Schreer, *Political Conflict and Ethnic Strategies: A Case Study of Burundi* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1976), 5.



Reid Richard explained the origin and foundation of Burundi from archaeological sources. According to him, Burundi's history is built on oral history which has been related to some archaeological facts.¹¹ The history of Burundi originates in two famous legends (Reid does not specify these traditional legends), and all those versions consider the ancient king of Burundi, namely Cambarantama, to be the founder of Burundi.¹² Burundi, like other African countries, recently developed the art of reading and writing; their oral history, transmitted from generation to generation, remains a valuable resource.

Political Organization and Leadership in Pre-colonial Burundi

Oketech and Polzer in *Pre-colonial Burundi (c1300-1890)* noted that the whole philosophy around the political organisation of Burundi before the colonialism era was based on the king or the Kingdom (ubwami) and the family of princes (abaganwa).¹³ It is noted that,

The chiefdoms themselves were overwhelmingly dominated by wealthy cattle-owning warrior elite who, together with the king and royal court officials, formed the Tutsi ruling class that comprised about 14%. Most of the population (around 85%) were peasants engaged in agriculture and were called Hutus, but there was also a small number of Twa (1%) who were economically and socially marginalised.¹⁴

According to René Lemarchand Twa, Tutsi and Hutu ethnic groups were the oldest habitants of Burundi (five hundred years) and were a free kingdom without ethnic issues and colonisation despite the social stratification. However, this structure ended with the coming of German colonisers at the beginning of the 20th century.¹⁵ Jean Pierre Chretien argued that the social structure did not discriminate against any group,

The classification of Hutu or Tutsi was not merely based on ethnic criteria. Hutu farmers that managed to acquire wealth and livestock were regularly granted the higher social status of Tutsi; some even made it to become close advisors of Ganwa. On the other hand, there are also reports of Tutsi that lost

¹¹ Reid J. Richard, *A History of Modern Africa: 1800 to the Present* (New York: Wiley Blackwell, 2012), 186.

¹² *Ibid.*, 186.

¹³ Oketech, J.S. & Polzer, T., *Pre-colonial Burundi: C.1300-1890* (Stellenbosch: Stellenbosch University Press, 1999), 91 .

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 91.

¹⁵ René Lemarchand, *The Dynamics of Violence in Central Africa* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 134.



all their cattle and subsequently lost their higher status and were called Hutu. Thus, in pre-colonial Burundi, the distinction between Hutu and Tutsi was a socio-cultural concept.¹⁶

This shows that social groups' differentiations in pre-colonial Burundi were more wealthy-oriented than ethnic-based. In addition, Nindorera Agnes observed that until 1965 there was no issue of ethnicity in Burundi, for the kingship was centralised and served all. Kristina and Roger add that the archaeological evidence proves the progressive settlement of Bantu in Burundi, whose origin was from Malawi and the Central African Republic, which are estimated to reach the place in the 12th century.

The treatment of the Batwa people group was different. The first occupants of Burundi were hunters known as pygmies (Batwa).¹⁷ Although pygmies were the first occupants of Burundi, this group of people was not carefully considered or respected in Burundian community leadership, even today. Sadly, they have been viewed as uncivilised and thus marginalised in the educational and development sectors.

Notably, land management was a critical form of property in the pre-colonial organisation and leadership. Stef Vandeginste note that the Tutsi group, or Ganwa (the ruling ethnic group in Burundi), used to own large portions of land and offered them to those loyal to their leadership.¹⁸ The politics of offering land as a reward for loyalty (ubugabire) became part of Burundi's leadership culture of controlling and dominating people. Those who benefited from the land allotment would sometimes bring the land produce to the ruling class.¹⁹

In summary, in pre-colonial Burundi, the monarchy kingdom was under the king's rule and his family, together with advisors who had all rights to decide on political issues, which included land management. The coming of colonisers and Western missionaries changed Burundi's traditional life and leadership structures.

¹⁶ Jean-Pierre Chretien, *The Great Lakes of Africa: Two Thousand Years of History* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2003), 35.

¹⁷ Kristina Bentley and Roger Southall, *An African Peace Process: Mandela, South Africa-Burundi* (Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2005), 32.

¹⁸ Stef Vandeginste, 17.

¹⁹ Robert Collins and James Burns, *A History of Sub-Saharan Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 125.



Internal Conflicts in Post-Independent Burundi

Thimna and Laureline observed that since independence in 1962, Burundi experienced several phases of ethnic conflicts and massacres between ethnic Hutus and ethnic Tutsis. Two of the worse massacres occurred in 1972 and 1993, causing more than 800,000 Burundians to flee and become refugees in Tanzania, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Rwanda and other neighbouring countries.²⁰ Michelle Muita and Mikias Yitbarek generally conclude that the civil war in Burundi occurred every day from 1962 to 1993. The immediate effect of 1993 (the killing of democratically elected president Melchior Ndadaye) accentuated the ethnic crisis in Burundi.²¹ After independence, many attempts to make Burundi a democratic nation were in vain.

In 1990, Burundi moved slowly towards a more democratic political system.²² Melchior Ndadaye, from the Hutu Front for Democracy in Burundi (FRODEBU) Party, was elected president in 1993.²³ Unfortunately, this leadership did not stand for long. Nigel Watt argued that tensions finally reached the boiling point on October 21 1993, three months after his election. The president was assassinated during a coup attempt, and the country descended into another period of civil strife.²⁴ This incident led the whole country to a cycle of ethnic-based killings between Hutu and Tutsi, leaving thousands of people dead.²⁵ Also, as Gerard Prunier records, a low-level insurgency developed. The Hutu rebels formed groups like the Party for the Liberation of the Hutu People-National Forces of Liberation (PALIPEHUTU-FNL).²⁶ The situation was worsened by the parliamentary election of another Hutu president, Cyprien Ntaryamira, to take over after Ndadaye's assassination. He was shot dead together with Rwandan President Habyarimana on April 6 1994, a few days after his appointment.²⁷ In less than one year, Burundi lost two Hutu presidents. More Hutu rebel groups were formed,

²⁰ Thimna Bunte and Laureline Monnier, *Mediating Land Conflict in Burundi* (Sweden: African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes, Accord, 2011), 15.

²¹ Michelle Mendi Muita et Mikias Yitbarek, *Burundi Conflict Insight* (Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University Press, 2018), 1.

²² Peter Uvin, *Ethnicity and Power in Burundi and Rwanda: Different Paths to Mass Violence* (New York: University of New York, 1999), 261.

²³ Peter Uvin, 262.

²⁴ Nigel Watt, *Burundi: Biography of a Small African Country* (New York: Hurst and Company, 2008), 47.

²⁵ Tom Bundervoet, "Livestock, Land and Political Power: The 1993 Killings in Burundi" *Journal of Peace Research*, May 3, 2009, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25674410> (accessed July 13, 2023).

²⁶ Gerard Prunier, *Africa's World War: Congo the Rwandan Genocide, and Making of a Continental Catastrophe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 59.

²⁷ Filip Reyntjens, *Briefing: Burundi: A Peaceful Transition after a Decade of War?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 117.



like the CNDD-FDD (National Council for Defense of Democracy-Forces for the Defense of Democracy). The narrative behind that movement was that Hutu leadership would not be secured if no Hutu people were among the national defence institutions, either the army or police. Filip Reyntjens observed that the minister of the Interior, Leonard Nyangoma led a FROBEDU faction into armed rebellion, creating the National Council for Defense of Democracy-Forces for the Defense of Democracy, and this group became a serious Hutu rebel group.²⁸

Then, the integration of CNDD-FDD into the government and the army changed the country's image. Refugees started returning to the country; people began building their lives, businesses, and educational system. Marc Lacey notes that after 12 years of living with a midnight-to-dawn curfew, Burundians were free to stay out late when the curfew was lifted on April 15, 2006, for the first time since 1993.²⁹ Thus, looking at the history of Burundi, especially in the post-independence period, the questions that come to mind are why this horrible history in a country with many who profess to be Christians. What was the source of these prolonged conflicts (1962 to 2005)?

The Root Causes of the Internal Conflicts in Burundi

Michaele Mendi Muita and Mikias Yitbarek identified three leading causes of these conflicts. First, they recognise poor economic performance as one of the structural causes of the conflicts. According to them, Burundi's conflicts are related to the country's long-term poor economic performance, leaving nearly 65% of the population under the poverty line. The 2010 Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI), considering deprivation in health, education and living standards, indicated that 81.3% of Burundians were poor, while 48.2% lived in severe poverty and deprivation.³⁰ In his paper, Juvenal Hatungimana similarly argues that when basic needs of life, such as food, shelter, clothing, schools, and hospitals, are addressed,

²⁸ Filip Reyntjens, *Briefing: Burundi: A Peaceful Transition after Decade of War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 117.

²⁹ Marc Lacey, "Burundi Curfew Lifted After 13 Years". *The New York Times*, April 15, 2006, <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/04/15/world-briefing-africa-burundi-curfew-lifted-after-13-years.html> (accessed July 13, 2023).

³⁰ Michaele Mendi Muita et Mikias Yitbarek, *Burundi Conflict Insight* (Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University Press, 2018), 2.



security problems do not arise. He adds that the conflicts will cease when the poverty issue is addressed.³¹

The second cause is ethnic tensions. As noted earlier, the minority Tutsi elites dominated the Burundian political scene during the pre-independence monarchical system of government. However, the ‘divide and rule’ Belgian colonial policy created new divisions between the Hutu and Tutsi ethnic groups that precipitated recurrent violence. Ethnic tensions have continued even in the modern history of Burundi. For instance, up to the end of April 2017, two years after the outbreak of conflict in 2015, over 420,600 Burundian refugees had fled to the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Uganda and Tanzania.³²

The third cause identified is the absence of true democracy; “one of the hallmarks of constitutionalism is that it serves to limit governmental power to counter arbitrariness and abuse. It is well established that respecting executive term limits as typically provided for in national constitutions is one of the basic elements of modern government.”³³ In the same vein, Reyntjens noted that the political situation escalated when Tutsi extremist army officers launched a coup on October 21, 1993, and murdered the democratically elected president Melchior Ndadaye, which resulted in violence and chaos over Burundi.³⁴

Another cause is poor education. For every community, education is the key to holistic development. It is easier for educated people to control non-educated or less educated persons, which is the case in Burundi. Elisabeth Stoltz noted that general levels of education in Burundi are low. In 2011, the country had an estimated literacy rate of approximately 60 percent.³⁵ Many young people joined the rebel fighting groups not because they were interested in war but simply because of negative influence and the low education level that predisposed them to be deceptive and destructive ethnic narratives.

Finally, a series of coup d’état in Burundi is another significant root cause of the conflicts. René Lemarchand observed that the monarchy in Burundi refused to recognise gains by Hutu candidates in the first legislative elections held by Burundi as an independent

³¹ Juvenal Hatungimana, “The Cause of Conflicts in Burundi,” *Hogskolan Dalarna*, June 15, 2011, <https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:519100/fulltext01.pdf> (accessed July 7, 2023).

³² Michaele Mendi Muita et Mikias Yitbarek, *Ibid.*, p.2.

³³ *Ibid.*, 2.

³⁴ Filip Reyntjens, *Briefing: Burundi: A Peaceful Transition after Decades of War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 117.

³⁵ Elisabeth Stoltz, “Education in Burundi,” *Modern Times*, November 26, 2016, <https://gcc.concernusa.org/education/education-in-burundi/> (accessed July 13, 2023).



country on May 10 1965. In response, a group of Hutu carried out a failed coup attempt against the monarch on October 18 1965, which prompted the killing of scores of Hutu politicians and intellectuals.³⁶ In the following year, 1966, King Mwambutsa IV was deposed by his son Prince Ntare V, who was also deposed by his prime minister Capt. Michael Micombero, and toppled by his military officer Colonel Jean Bagaza in 1976. Major Pierre Buyoya overthrew President Bagaza in 1987. To emphasise this argument, Peter Hagget explained that an estimated 250,000 people died in Burundi from the various conflicts between 1962 and 1993.³⁷ All these coup d'états and others played a significant role in destabilising and plunging Burundi into civil wars.

Consequences of Civil War in Burundi

The civil war in Burundi resulted in numerous consequences: the loss of human lives (genocide) and material, social and cultural deterioration, and environmental effects, among others. In 1972, as reported by René Lemarchand, “the rebels attacked both Tutsi and any Hutu who refused to join their rebellion. During this initial Hutu outbreak, 800 to 1200 people were killed.³⁸ After the assassination of King Ntare V of Burundi in 1972, the Tutsi-dominated government of Michel Micombero used the army to combat Hutu rebels and commit genocide, murdering targeted members of the Hutu majority. Matthew White noted that “the total number of casualties was never established, but contemporary estimates put the number of people killed between 80,000 and 210,000.”³⁹

Children became victims of war. On the one hand, they became orphans; on the other hand, they were enlisted in the army regardless of age. Child Soldiers International reported that UNICEF led the release of 3,000 children from the military and armed groups. Most of those children who participated in the program returned to farming and fishing in their local communities, but nearly 600 returned to school.⁴⁰

³⁶ René Lemarchand, 134.

³⁷ Peter Hagget, *Encyclopedia of World Geography* (New York: Marshall Cavendish, 2022), 76.

³⁸ René Lemarchand, *Burundi 1972 : Au Bord des Génocides* (Paris : L'Harmattan, 2007), 106.

³⁹ Matthew White, “Death Tolls for the Major Wars and Atrocities of the Twentieth Century; C. Burundi,” *Modern Times*, June 9, 2007 <https://users.erols.com/mwhite28/warstat2.htm#Rwanda> (accessed July 13, 2023).

⁴⁰ Child Soldiers International, “Child Soldiers Global Report 2008,” *New York Times*, May 15, 2008, <https://reliedweb.int/report/burundi-UNICEF-welcomes-release-232-child-soldiers> (accessed July 13, 2023).



During this period, Burundi continued passing through a series of civil wars that made the government unrestful and resulted in mass displacements, many refugees, the destruction of infrastructure, and many widows and orphans. In 1987, Major Pierre Buyoya (Tutsi) overthrew President Bagaza in a coup d'état that led to the suspension of the constitution and the dissolution of the political parties in Burundi. He reinforced the military system to control the country in every aspect and sector. Indeed, it was not a durable solution to save the country from that chaos, but it was a hash decision based on the situation that the government was experiencing. Different authors support this argument and explain the harmful economic and social crisis that Burundians experienced during this period of internal conflict. Jennifer Olmsted explained that the armed conflict negatively affected infrastructure, public health provision, and social order.⁴¹

Elena Lanchovichina and Maros argue that in a war situation, the labour force is affected in multiple ways. Most often, the drastic loss of life, population change, the shrinking labour force due to the movement of refugees and displacement and the destruction of infrastructure allows for a deterioration of productivity.⁴² In addition, a significant environmental effect is another observable consequence of the war in Burundi. The fact that all rebel groups lived in the forest, where also wild animals live. Jurgen Brauer and Young Nigel noted that war contributes to environmental degradation in two main ways. First, it directly kills off native biota; second, it indirectly deprives species of resources needed to survive or even their entire habitat.⁴³

The civil war destabilised the structured political institutions and resulted in a constitutional crisis. The whole country became chaotic when a president and ministers were assassinated in the middle of their term. Adin Thayer noted that when war strikes, it affects government structures and the people in power.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Jennifer Olmsted “Globalization denied: Gender and Poverty in Iraq and Palestine”, in *the Wages of Empire: Neoliberal Policies, Armed Repression, and Women’s Poverty*, Colorado, April 22, 2007, <https://drew.edu/business-economics-department/olmsted-publications/> (accessed July 13, 2023).

⁴² Elena Lanchovichina and Maros Ivanic, “Economic Effects of the Syrian War and the Spread of the Islamic State on the Levant”, *Policy Research Working Papers*, February 2, 2015, <https://elibrary.worldbank.org/doi/10.1596/1813-9450-7135> (accessed July 13, 2023).

⁴³ Jurgen Brauer and Young Nigel, *The Oxford International Encyclopedia of Peace* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 66.

⁴⁴ Adin Thayer, “Women in Post-Genocide Rwanda: Facing the Past to Build a Future” *Isis International*, June 12, 2009, http://www.isiswomen.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1413:women-in-post-



The Advent of Christianity in Burundi and Ethnic Affiliation of Churches

Christianity is not a new neologism in Burundi language and culture. Western missionaries first came to Burundi in 1899. The first missionaries faced a hostile local monarch unwilling to see another centre of power develop. To the monarch, the Western missionaries threatened his control; therefore, he killed the pioneering missionaries.⁴⁵ However, Toyin noted that the monarch's worries and behaviour did not stop the mission work. In the early 20th century, faith-based confessions sent missionaries to Burundi. The first round were Catholics and Protestants, then came Baptists in the 1920s, Free Methodists, Anglicans and Friends.⁴⁶

Burundians found it hard to understand the work of missionaries due to their relationship with colonisers—they were people of the same skin colour, language and origin. Cardinal Lavigerie observed that the praxis of the missionary enterprise, in general, turned out to be different, and the ideals of the missionary foundations were not effectively implemented.⁴⁷ In Burundi, missions contributed to building respectful and reputable schools and hospitals like the rest of the world. Blainey Geoffrey records that the Roman Catholic Church established hospitals for the old and orphanages for the young; hospices for the sick of all ages; places for the lepers; and hostels or inns where pilgrims could buy a cheap bed and meal.⁴⁸ John added that many of Europe's universities were also founded by the church then. Many historians state that universities and cathedral schools continued the interest in learning as promoted by monasteries.⁴⁹ Monasteries were havens for the poor, hospitals, and hospices for the dying. Medical practice was critical in medieval monasteries, and they are best known for their contributions to the medical tradition.⁵⁰

Missions impacted the holistic life of the community. Adrian Hastings observed that the teachings of Jesus, such as the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-37), are among the most important sources of modern notions of human rights and welfare commonly provided by governments in the West. Long-held Christian teachings on sexuality, marriage,

genocide-rwandafacing-the-past-to-build-a-future-&catid=169:multiple-intolerance-mounting-resistance (accessed July 13, 2023).

⁴⁵ Elias Kifon Bongmba, *Routledge Companion to Christianity in Africa* (London: Routledge, 2015), 367.

⁴⁶ Toyin, 121.

⁴⁷ Lavigerie, *Instructions aux Missionnaires* (Hastings: Namur, 1950), 286.

⁴⁸ Blainey Geoffrey, *A Short History of Christianity* (Penguin Viking: Viking Press, 2011), 214-215.

⁴⁹ P. John, *The Renaissance: A Short History. Modern Library Chronicles* (New York: Modern Library 2000), 9.

⁵⁰ Harold G. Koenig and al. *Handbook of Religion and Health* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 22.



and family life have also been influential and controversial recently.⁵¹ Dennis Dunn noted that monasteries were models of productivity and economic resourcefulness, teaching their local communities animal husbandry, cheese making, winemaking, and other skills.⁵² Further, Rodney Stark argued that early Christianity positively affected women's status by condemning marital infidelity, divorce, incest, polygamy, birth control, infanticide, and abortion.⁵³ Early Church Fathers advocated against adultery, polygamy, homosexuality, pederasty, bestiality, prostitution, and incest while advocating for the sanctity of the marriage bed.⁵⁴

Regarding conversion, Hutu people were majorly Roman Catholics, while the Tutsi ethnic group were Protestant Christians. However, the minority ruling ethnic group of Tutsi who ruled the country from the monarch system up to democracy and post-democracy era claimed to be Roman Catholics. The Tutsi dominated leadership, business, education and other critical sectors of the economy. As a result, social inequality increased in the society. Those who secured education opportunities formed part of the decision-makers in the church and society.

The Steady Growth of Christianity in Burundi

There has been a steady numerical growth in Christianity in Burundi. Joseph Gahama observed that in 1916 there were just 7,000 Christians in the country.⁵⁵ Even though Burundian kings were hostile to the Western missionaries, the Christian movement grew faster in Burundi, and many Burundians adhered to that movement in different denominations. The Pew Research Center reported that in 2008 Christianity was at 85.1%; in 2010, the number of Christians represented 94.1% of the national population, of whom 73% are Roman Catholic and 20% Protestant. In 2017, Christianity was 93.92% (Catholic 58.6% and protestant 35.32%).⁵⁶

⁵¹ Adrian Hastings, *The Church in Africa, 1450-1950* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 309.

⁵² Dennis J. Dunn, *A History of Orthodox, Islamic, and Western Christian Political Values* (Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 60.

⁵³ Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity the Sociologist Reconsiders History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020), 104.

⁵⁴ John Witte, *From Sacrament to Contract Marriage, Religion, and in the Western Tradition* (Westminster: John Knox Press, 1997), 20.

⁵⁵ Joseph Gahama, *Le Burundi sous Administration Belge : La période du Mandat 1919-1939* (Paris : Karthala, 2001), 217.

⁵⁶ Pew Research Center, "Global Christianity," *NewTimes*, December 2014, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/interactives/global-christianity/#/Burundi,All> (accessed July 13, 2023).



Longman states that the “initial conversions to Catholicism in Burundi were almost exclusively among Hutu people, a majority in Burundi, but they were not favoured to occupy higher positions within the church leadership. In contrast, Protestant missionaries gained early conversions in the elite but minority Tutsi people of Burundi.⁵⁷ Yet Tutsi could impose forced, extractive labour on the majority Hutus, compensate Hutu lands and impose taxes and mandatory cash crop collection.⁵⁸

In Longman’s view, those ethnic and religious-based differences have been the reason behind discriminatory practices that have characterised the Burundian community for a long time. This segregationist seed within the church of Burundi has resulted in a historical question to know if the numerical Christian growth in Burundi is proportional to the crises and conflicts that Burundi has gone through. The pending question is to understand the contribution of the church in addressing the issues Burundi has experienced.

Christianity and Social Cohesion in Burundi

The term “social cohesion” is prominently used in the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission*. This body investigates the history of Burundi, the atrocities and casualties that Burundi has gone through and promotes truth, forgiveness, unity, reconciliation, and peace. In *The Church and Social Cohesion: Connecting Communities and Serving People*, Madeline Pennington noted that “a cohesive society is one in which people trust, respect and understand one another beyond the groups they immediately identify with. It is one in which local, regional, and national communities work together to face shared challenges and celebrate shared achievements.”⁵⁹ For social cohesion to become a reality, churches are responsible for promoting human dignity because humanity is in the image and likeness of God (*imago Dei*). The church should speak out against vices such as killings and torture, disappearances and arbitrary arrestations, ethnic division and gender violence.

Most of the time, social cohesion is eroded by violating the community’s cultural values and norms. Solomon Richard noted that “the teachings and practices of major world religions reveal spiritual and moral formulations that support peace, social justice,

⁵⁷ Longman Timothy, *Christianity and Genocide in Rwanda* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 46.

⁵⁸ Kristina Bentley, *An African Peace Process: Mandela, South Africa and Burundi* (New York: HSRC Press, 2005), 41.

⁵⁹ Madeline Pennington, *The Church and Social Cohesion: Connecting Communities and Serving People* (London: THEOS, 2020), 112.



reconciliation and harmony between and within and between humanity and divinity.”⁶⁰ The church is an institution of peacemakers (Gen 13:8-9; Matt 5:9), and the world expects Christians to be the pioneers of peace and faith warriors. It means believers must come in front, being models and examples that the world would imitate and follow to strengthen the community relationship. Therefore, the question that would come to mind is whether the Christian church in Burundi reached lived its identity in the history of Burundi.

Christian Church and Conflicts in Burundi

With the steady growth of Christianity in Burundi and the frequent internal conflicts, one wonders how the church addressed the prevailing societal needs.

The Church Living Its Identity

Hedley, John Brooke, Numbers, and Ronald stated that Christianity has been intricately intertwined with the history and formation of Western society. Throughout its long history, the church has been a major source of social services like schooling and medical care; an inspiration for art, culture and philosophy; and an influential player in politics and religion.⁶¹

In Burundi, religion played a significant role in bringing Burundians together during and after the war crisis. Even though many lives were lost, none can ignore the church’s contribution, primarily through relevant teachings and preaching on peace, harmony, social cohesion, and holistic development. Looking at the number of people who died during the crisis, it is hard to picture how the church comforted the thousands of those hurting and bereaved. It was critical in bringing Burundians together during and after the crises. For instance, in 2013, the Anglican Church trained 15,000 young people on conflict management and tolerance. The church kept its foremost mission of bringing Burundians together as the body of Christ by promoting unity and forgiveness. The church also facilitated talks for peace and an inclusive system of government.⁶² Similarly, the church did not silent; it kept condemning the wrong of the government and individuals who trampled on human rights by killings and violating women. This strong voice of the church, advocating for voiceless

⁶⁰ Salomon H. Richard, “Forward,” in *Interfaith Dialogue and Peacebuilding* (Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2002), viii.

⁶¹ Hedley John Brooke; Numbers, Ronald L. *Science and Religion Around the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 71.

⁶² Gerard Prunier, *Africa’s World War: Congo, the Rwandan Genocide and the Making of Continental Catastrophe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 65.



groups like women and children, has contributed to alerting the perpetrators that what they are doing is a sin and condemned by the larger community.

Although the Burundi church contributed a lot to slow down the crisis the church could not bridge some gaps. Gahama Joseph, in his work *le Burundi sous l'administration Belge: la période du mandat 1919-1939*, noted that the Catholic church was introduced under Belgium rule (1916-1962) and expanded rapidly during the interwar period when it was encouraged as part of the colonial civilising mission.”⁶³ In 2010, the Pew Research Centre indicated that 94.1% of Burundians were Christians; despite this numerical strength, the church failed in some aspects.

First, some church leaders failed to stand up and denounce the wrong done by their church members in certain political camps. Second, since many political leaders are members of particular churches, the churches did not enforce church discipline on political leaders who promoted the conflicts. The fear of losing the regular support provided by those politicians motivated the actions of many. Yet the Bible instructs, “*If I say to the wicked, you shall die, and you give him no warning nor speaking to warn the wicked from his wicked way, in order to save his life, that wicked person shall die for his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand*” (Isaiah 3:18-19). Therefore the church forfeited its role to warn the people who misuse the God-given authority.

Third, Christians and church leaders suffered the war's severe consequences, impacting their views. The killings were not selective; both parties (perpetrators and victims) experienced the effects of war. Church leaders were emotionally taken away by what happened to their family members. Among thousands of people who lost their lives, there were some family members of those leading the church. As victims, some could not speak up when their so-called enemies were experiencing revenge. It was like the case of the prophet Jonah who was somehow willing to see his nation's enemies facing God's punishment, and this attitude led him to disobedience of God (Jonah 1).

In summary, the church worked towards reconciling and bringing hope and healing to Burundi. But, simultaneously, it struggled to live this identity fully during the war period.

⁶³ Gahama Joseph, *Le Burundi sous l'Administration Belge : La Période du Mandat 1919-1939* (Paris : Karthala, 2001), 217.



Conclusion

Before Western missionaries came, Burundi was a well-organised kingdom, with the king having absolute power over the people and the land. This traditional political structure changed with the coming of German and Belgium colonisers who took over the king's power. Christianity, which has become the religion of most Burundians, was also established in Burundi during the colonisation period. After colonisation, Burundi has continued to experience perennial conflicts along tribal lines. The paper highlights that poor economic performance, ethnic tensions, absence of true democracy, poor education, and a coup d'état caused conflicts in post-independence Burundi. The wars and conflicts have caused much loss of lives, property and displacement of people. In this context, the church has played a pivotal role in bringing reconciliation, peace, hope, and healing. It has advocated for truth, forgiveness and justice despite the challenging issues it faced.

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