

Introduction

Talking Politics and Watching the Border

The two men moved off to set themselves down further off on a knoll. All the events of the region passed before them. Public life was set out on the mat, just as private life. Great politics made room for family life. The habits of cows, the hatred of men, the youth . . . There was no lack of time, they had all day. For them, every day seemed alike. They lived.

Michel Kayoya, *Sur les traces de mon père: jeunesse du Burundi à la découverte des valeurs* (Bujumbura, 1968), 32.

The priest and poet Abbé Michel Kayoya wrote of the days of his father as a bucolic idyll, two men discussing the world as their cattle grazed nearby. But each day was most certainly not alike. Kayoya wrote in a time of dramatic change, when a timeless fantasy of a changeless past seemed to provide a rock to build his country on anew. Just six years earlier, in 1962, the Kingdom of Burundi had regained its independence from Belgium, and set off towards an unknown post-colonial condition. Then, in 1966, a twenty-six-year-old army officer seized power, abolishing the ancient monarchy. The politics of the global Cold War pressed in around the tiny country. Relations with its central African neighbours were tense. Uncertainties, hopes and fearful novelties infused the gossip and rumours that circled through the hills. Some people spoke of the imminent return of the king, others wondered what a true republic really looked like. The government insisted on the patriotic unity of the nation, while in private ministers wrote of rising ‘racism’ between elite rivals of different ethnic categories. At independence the population had largely ignored appeals to ethnic politics; a decade later, in 1972, a brutal rebellion against a minority of a minority triggered a genocidal response from the state, during which the Abbé too would lose his life.

Through it all, people spoke about one thing. *Ukuri ni kumwe*, the politicians declared: there is only one truth, or the truth is one. *Ukuri*, ‘truth’, suffused political slogans and political argument, both earnest

and insincere. The idea it stood for gave people something to search for and cling to, something to fight for and something to kill for, something that had to be concealed and something that had to be shouted. It was a call to righteous unity, the thrilling certainty of victory over deceit, and a coercive tool of conformity and subjection. During brief tastes of democratic contest, people much like Abbé Kayoya's contemplative cowherds talked about how many claims to a singular truth they had heard. Rumours came to the ears of farmers and teachers, masons and traders, rumours that could not be reconciled with the truth that was spoken in public. The politicians were right: there was only one truth. But it was an open question whether that truth was to be found in their propaganda, in the claims of their impudent rivals or in the probing questions of those who doubted the reality of public speech. When democratic moments gave way to authoritarian control, and an anxious state issued its one truth in tones of nervous threat, sensible people echoed the same phrase back: there is only one truth. They declared their loyalty to the truth of power, but that truth changed. It seemed the state, and reality itself, turned on the whims and schemes of great men. Yet with the right accent, others too could claim this one truth. It could be a means to call on the state to protect its own, or to kill those one wanted it to kill. There was power in words of truth, even if one did not believe them to be true.

They spoke their own languages of truth, attuned to their own imaginations, poetics, social expectations and the particular pressures of the moment. But as the people of this corner of the world navigated the processes and blockages of decolonisation, the challenge of the truth was one they shared with many times and many places. After all, everybody knows politicians lie. Politics is the enemy of truth; democratic hopefuls will say anything to get elected, demagogues twist seeds of true emotion into a grimacing caricature of deceit and totalitarian systems displace reality entirely with a truth of their own making. When you seek power you may know you have to bend the truth, if only for the greater good you can do. But of course you don't believe the things that other people say, since they're all out for power themselves.

But truth is also the substance of politics, its language, symbol and goal. Every lying politician claims to speak the truth; even some of the honest ones do too. Sometimes they may even be right. For the uncommitted, the democratic choice is a choice of truths and a test of

sincerity. Finding the truth in news is finding a companion you trust and an authority you follow. For the true believers, truth is what binds them together, gives them their strength and their purpose, the substance of their certainty. Yes, our politician might have spun a detail here or there, perhaps he lied to trick those other fools – but he knows what’s really going on. We understand the real world; those others are living in fantasy. In the end, a politician’s lies may even become true; that is why he lies. Politics is about truth, even if it kills it along the way.

Killing, however, may be a literal part of the process, and not just a metaphor for it. It is not only totalitarian rulers who harm those who insist on speaking undesired truths, things that get in the way of the reality they are trying to create. People who cling stubbornly to their benighted delusions may be dangerous to those who see the truth, as Plato claimed; sometimes they need more than just a push to realise what’s good for them, or so truth-tellers tell themselves. And even as it destroys, violence creates new truths, a truth of pain that fills the life to follow. When people who know the truth see the lies of others bearing down on them, the apparent threat both to their bodies and to their reality may demand a drastic response. What else is there to defend? Truth, its preservation, destruction and proliferation, may be a word of violence as much as it may be the soul of peace.

Talking Politics

The politics of Burundi are as complex as any other. Power and inequality, deviance and conformity, hope and fear and ambition have posed their chimeric challenges from day to day. The densely populated country lies tucked between two giants in Tanzania and the Democratic Republic of Congo, and entangled with its far more intimate neighbour, Rwanda. Into its national conversations come wandering cousins, friends and foreigners looking for trade, for husbands or wives and new possibilities, or for refuge from their own national catastrophes. Where the country is known at all, it is most typically recognised for its ethnic politics, often misunderstood as a shadow twin of Rwanda’s more notorious (if equally poorly grasped) experience. Burundi too has its majority Hutu, minority Tutsi, its perennially excluded Twa, and many other distinct and overlapping identities and categories besides. Like Rwanda it has known violent,

even genocidal relations between its component groups. This book encompasses the brief moment when these labels first entered into, then overwhelmed national politics. But neither the politics nor the history of Burundi can begin with such terms. They are products of politics, not precedent; they are products of time and history.

History-writing in and about Africa has passed through a succession of shifts in focus and priority, influenced in part by the politics of the moment. A pursuit of continuity, of the deep past denied by colonial regimes of knowledge, characterised the first generation of academic historians around the decade of independence itself, in the 1960s. They looked beyond Ajayi's colonial 'episode' towards the rich history from which political independence might draw inspiration, and to which it might represent restoration.¹ Coming into its own in the 1970s through the work of Jan Vansina, Jean-Pierre Chrétien, Émile Mworoha and others, research along this line in the Great Lakes took language and oral tradition to drive the debates of written history farther back than in many better documented parts of the continent.² But when the promise of independence across Africa seemed to falter, historical narratives shifted to the colonial moment itself. Historians sought the legacies of division and misrule that, it seemed, doomed a continent to failure. While never quite 'foreshortening' the past from its deep precolonial horizons,³ the so-called *burundo-française* 'school' of historiography under Chrétien, Mworoha and Joseph Gahama's influence augmented burgeoning precolonial research with insights into the transformations of colonisation.⁴ In the 1980s and amid the

¹ J. F. A. Ajayi, 'Colonialism: An Episode in African History', in *Tradition and Change in Africa: The Essays of J. F. Ade Ajayi*, ed. Toyin Falola (Trenton, NJ, 2000). See also Terence Ranger, 'Nationalist Historiography, Patriotic History and the History of the Nation: The Struggle Over the Past in Zimbabwe', *Journal of Southern African Studies* 30 (2004).

² Jan Vansina, *La légende du passé: traditions orales du Burundi* (Tervuren, 1972); Émile Mworoha, *Peuples et rois de l'Afrique des lacs: le Burundi et les royaumes voisins au XIXe siècle* (Dakar, 1977); Jean-Pierre Chrétien, *Burundi, l'histoire retrouvée: 25 ans de métier d'historien en Afrique* (Paris, 1993); Centre de civilisation burundaise, ed., *La civilisation ancienne des peuples des Grands Lacs* (Paris, 1981).

³ Cf. Richard Reid, 'Past and Presentism: The "Precolonial" and the Foreshortening of African History', *The Journal of African History* 52 (2011), 135–55.

⁴ E.g. Chrétien, *Burundi, l'histoire retrouvée*; Joseph Gahama, *Le Burundi sous administration belge: la période du mandat, 1919–1939* (Paris, 1983). On the historiographical 'school', see Jean Stengers, 'Note bibliographique', *Bulletin de*

regional horrors of the 1990s, when Burundi fell to civil war, the fruits of this history laid out the distortions of ethnicity and power under Belgian rule as prologue to the present.⁵ Then, with the fiftieth anniversary of independence approaching and multiparty democracy once again an unsteady norm across the continent, the last days of colonial rule came to prominence in historical writing. Influenced by parallel work in South Asia and the Middle East,⁶ historians of Africa looked ever more towards dissonance, the complexity of plural nationalisms, loyalisms and disagreements that fuelled decolonisation debates, beyond liberation mythology.⁷ Christine Deslaurier's monumental thesis achieved this essential task for Burundi, setting the stage for much of what was to come.⁸

For the years that followed the end of empire, however, historians of Africa commonly gave way to contemporary studies of society and politics. Certain inescapable moments received some dedicated attention (such as Chrétien and Dupaquier's indispensable address to

l'Académie royale de Belgique 10–11 (1988); Jean-Pierre Chrétien, 'Burundi: le métier d'historien: querelle d'école?', *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 25 (1991). While initially complimentary, the designation as a 'school' was particularly deployed by critics who attacked the close identification of historians and the political leadership of Burundi's Second Republic. Following renewed ethnic violence under the Third Republic in 1988, this academic dispute became exceptionally bitter and public, reflecting a damaging divide within the scholarship on Burundi. See Roger Botte, 'Quand l'essentiel n'est pas ce que l'on dit, mais ce que l'on tait', *Politique africaine* 12 (1983); René Lemarchand, 'L'école historique burundo-française: une école pas comme les autres', *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 24 (1990); Filip Reyntjens, 'Du bon usage de la science: "l'école historique burundo-française"', *Politique africaine* 37 (1990); Jean-Pierre Chrétien, 'Burundi: Social Sciences Facing Ethnic Violence', *Issue: A Journal of Opinion* 19 (1990).

⁵ Jean-Pierre Chrétien, 'Hutu et Tutsi au Rwanda et au Burundi', in *Au cœur de l'ethnie: ethnies, tribalisme et état en Afrique*, eds. Jean-Loup Amselle and Elikia M'Bokolo (Paris, 1999); Joseph Gahama and Augustin Mvuyekure, 'Jeu ethnique, idéologie missionnaire et politique coloniale', in *Les ethnies ont une histoire*, eds. Jean-Pierre Chrétien and Gérard Prunier (Paris, 2003).

⁶ E.g. Anthony Milner, *The Invention of Politics in Colonial Malaya* (Cambridge, 1995); Israel Gershoni and James Jankowski, eds., *Rethinking Nationalism in the Arab Middle East* (New York, 1997).

⁷ E.g. Daniel Branch, *Defeating Mau Mau, Creating Kenya* (Cambridge, 2009); Luise White, *Unpopular Sovereignty: Rhodesian Independence and African Decolonization* (Chicago, IL, 2015).

⁸ Christine Deslaurier, 'Un monde politique en mutation: le Burundi à la veille de l'indépendance (circa 1956–1961)' (PhD dissertation, Université Panthéon-Sorbonne, 2002).

Burundi's violence of 1972 most notably),⁹ and Burundi's scholars and politicians produced several important teleological overviews that sought to narrate how their country reached a state of crisis in the 1990s.¹⁰ But otherwise, complex history of the decades after independence too easily became a simple 'background summary', a narrative précis weakly integrated into a greater project dominated by others: the drive to describe and explain the postcolony. The practice of governance, the nature of the state, its supposed weakness, evident tenacity and common violence, provoked explanatory schemas from political scientists and sociologists that drew on the interpenetration of state and society, neo-patrimonial modes of rule and entanglements of power.¹¹

The past was not absent from this project; one could not cut out the colony from its sequel. Achille Mbembe, Mahmood Mamdani, Crawford Young and many others presented differing visions of how the postcolony reproduced relationships of domination and extraction from its colonial precedent, autocracy arising from autocracy and obscenity from obscenity.¹² Yet rarely did the historical process of this connection come clearly into focus. Mbembe specifically resisted contemplating a linear narrative, describing rather the spirit and experience of the postcolony as an 'age', 'made up of discontinuities, reversals, inertias, and swings that overlay one another, interpenetrate one another, and envelope one another'.¹³ For others, the

⁹ Jean-Pierre Chrétien and Jean-François Dupaquier, *Burundi 1972, au bord des génocides* (Paris, 2007).

¹⁰ Augustin Nsanze, *Le Burundi contemporain: l'état-nation en question (1956–2002)* (Paris, 2003); Sylvestre Ntibantunganya, *Une démocratie pour tous les Burundais: de l'autonomie à Ndadaye (1956–1993)* (Paris, 1999); Raphaël Ntibazonkiza, *Au royaume des seigneurs de la lance: de l'indépendance à nos jours (1962–1992)* (Brussels, 1993).

¹¹ Among the most influential remain the diverse approaches of Jean-François Bayart and his collaborators: see Jean-François Bayart, *The State in Africa: The Politics of the Belly* (London, 1993); Jean-François Bayart, S. D. K. Ellis and B. Hibou, *Criminalisation of the State in Africa* (Oxford, 1999); Jean-François Bayart, 'Africa in the World: A History of Extraversion', *African Affairs* 99 (2000); Jean-François Bayart and Achille Mbembe, eds., *Le politique par le bas en Afrique noire* (Paris, 2008).

¹² Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley, CA, 2001); Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (Cambridge, 1996); Crawford Young, *The African Colonial State in Comparative Perspective* (New Haven, CT, 1994).

¹³ Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, 14.

transformation from colony to postcolony was glossed over as a binary switch, or shrouded in atemporal ‘legacies’, leapfrogging periods of uncertainty and possibility in between.¹⁴

The heart of this transformation, however, remains a critical (and critically) historical problem: a distinctive moment when the temporalities and relationships of colonisation, decolonisation, prior subjectivities and future aspirations were most self-consciously experienced at once and in flux, with open and uncertain horizons of what the post-colonial world would look like. This problem has long been recognised, if comparatively rarely pursued. The first means of serious address to it came in the familiar yardstick of continuity and change, evaluating the relative influence of ‘natural inertial forces’¹⁵ within late colonial institutions and the self-interested agency of postcolonial state authorities.¹⁶ However, just as the pursuit of ‘plural nationalisms’ uncovered a deeper complexity in the premise to decolonisation, the emergence of the postcolony now requires a similar openness to dissonance, fluidity and the processes and possibilities of change. The transformations of political debate in this moment of uncertainty remain the pivotal disjuncture of Africa’s contemporary history, only beginning to receive a commensurate eye from its historians.

Of course, the desire to understand the first decades of independence is no less influenced by contemporary concerns than previous shifts. Following the wave of multiparty democracy in the 1990s and 2000s, concerns that this ‘second liberation’ has stumbled turn the mind back to the apparent failures of the first. In Burundi, the political settlement that eventually led to the end of its civil war in 2005 is today challenged by political turmoil, and by a new constitution that, to

¹⁴ Problematised by Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley, CA, 2005), 17–18. See also Frederick Cooper, *Africa Since 1940: The Past of the Present* (Cambridge, 2002).

¹⁵ Crawford Young, ‘The End of the Post-Colonial State in Africa? Reflections on Changing African Political Dynamics’, *African Affairs* 103 (2004), 29.

¹⁶ Notably in Tanzania, e.g. Leander Schneider, ‘Colonial Legacies and Postcolonial Authoritarianism in Tanzania: Connects and Disconnects’, *African Studies Review* 49 (2006); Andrew Burton and Michael Jennings, ‘Introduction: The Emperor’s New Clothes? Continuities in Governance in Late Colonial and Early Postcolonial East Africa’, *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 40 (2007).

opponents, appears as a dangerous departure from a brief episode of consensus.¹⁷ Amid great tension, a long-delayed Truth and Reconciliation Commission is today in operation, specifically designed to bring together the crimes of the first decade of independence with the griefs of the 1990s. Continually fraught with concerns over its political constraints or instrumentalisation, it has so far documented the existence of over 4,000 mass graves, and taken the testimony of tens of thousands of witnesses.¹⁸ But in the shadow of its operation, Burundi's postcolonial history remains a string of mute yet meaningful dates, a chain of violence reaching out from memories of a liberation betrayed.

As Frederick Cooper observes, 'What gets lost in narrating history as the triumph of freedom followed by failure to use that freedom is a sense of process.'¹⁹ The form of independence achieved was just one of a range of potentialities pursued in the moment, and not the inevitable march of history.²⁰ In turn, the processes that permitted catastrophe across the following decade similarly produced their myriad alternatives, possibilities of political action that blossomed, or were cut short, from one moment to the next. In the 1950s and 1960s, as empires cracked, new nations scrambled to form themselves from the strands of politics, society, history and imagination that lay entangled or unravelled about them. For ancient kingdoms as for new formations, the premise of these problems was the same. What could be said, what could be questioned and what new truths could be defined, constituted the substance of a self-conscious moment of reconstruction, restoration, preservation and revolution. It was an open-ended conversation defined above all by uncertainty and the search for certainty. As one old man in northern Burundi described it, this was *le temps de la*

¹⁷ Willy Nindorera, 'Chronique d'une crise annoncée', *L'Afrique des Grands Lacs* 19 (2015); Anne-Claire Courtois, *Le Burundi en crise: pirates contre 'vrais' combattants*, Note de la FRS 11/17 (2017); Stef Vandeginste, *Burundi's Constitutional Amendment: What Do We Know So Far?* IOB Analysis and Policy Brief 24 (2017).

¹⁸ Méthode Ndikumamasabo, 'Quel avenir pour la commission vérité et réconciliation du Burundi?', *L'Afrique des Grands Lacs* 20 (2016); Mgr Jean-Louis Nahimana, *Discours du Président de la Commission Vérité et Réconciliation* (23 May 2018), www.uantwerpen.be/images/uantwerpen/container49546/files/Burundi/JT/230518.pdf.

¹⁹ Frederick Cooper, 'Possibility and Constraint: African Independence in Historical Perspective', *Journal of African History* 49 (2008), 169.

²⁰ Frederick Cooper, *Citizenship Between Empire and Nation: Remaking France and French Africa, 1945–1960* (Princeton, NJ, 2014).

politique, the time of politics, for his country as for much of the world.²¹ Different voices clamoured in public contest over the truth of authority, over the true nature of political community, over the truths of society that must be defended or forcibly brought into being.

Diverse temporal scales are needed in order to bring such possibilities into view. Derek Peterson has sought a time of change through differing voices of patriotic and spiritual dissent in East Africa between the 1930s and 1970s,²² Emma Hunter chooses twenty years of global decolonisation to consider the blossoming of public political debate in Tanzania,²³ while Kate Skinner takes a full century as the frame for grappling with nationalism in British Togoland.²⁴ The scale here is narrower. Burundi's long 1960s stretched from the abrupt beginning of political competition in 1959, through formal independence in 1962, to a cataclysm of destruction in 1972. It was with this violence that the future horizons of possibility closed, and people felt they recognised a new certainty in what postcolonial relationships, identities and life itself now meant. Yet the time of politics was defined not so much by these great watersheds as by the processes and conversations that joined them, and all the other possibilities that came and went in between. Other scales will rightly be chosen for other conversations. But the long 1960s provide a fitting frame for examining the processes of decolonisation as a time of intensity, uncertainty and change.

In pursuit of these most changeable of times, historians must return to the contemporary 'country studies' written by political scientists in the 1960s themselves.²⁵ René Lemarchand's dual analysis of Rwanda and Burundi, written before the ultimate realisation of disaster in 1972, was exemplary of this literature;²⁶ he later condensed and

²¹ Rwegeze Pierre, interview in Mihigo, 2011. Compare Zanzibar's contemporaneous *Zama za siasa*; see Jonathon Glassman, *War of Words, War of Stones: Racial Thought and Violence in Colonial Zanzibar* (Bloomington, IN, 2011).

²² Derek Peterson, *Ethnic Patriotism and the East African Revival: A History of Dissent, c. 1935–1972* (Cambridge, 2012).

²³ Emma Hunter, *Political Thought and the Public Sphere in Tanzania: Freedom, Democracy and Citizenship in the Era of Decolonization* (Cambridge, 2015).

²⁴ Kate Skinner, *The Fruits of Freedom in British Togoland: Literacy, Politics and Nationalism, 1914–2014* (Cambridge, 2015).

²⁵ Cooper, 'Possibility', 173.

²⁶ René Lemarchand, *Rwanda and Burundi* (London, 1970).

extended his account for Burundi alone on the eve of new catastrophe in the 1990s.²⁷ Lemarchand modelled the structure of Burundi's emerging postcolonial politics as a series of binary elite rivalries, a logic of opposition displaced from one polarising framework to the next. Dynastic rivalries reincarnated as party politics, parties transposed to factions, and factions to ethnic ideologies. Lemarchand's essential dissection remains rich in detail and insight, but it also leaves relatively untouched a series of assumptions that have long paralysed understandings of political change in the region. Politics in the Great Lakes region is too often treated as the preserve of great men, of princes, chiefs, the handful of colonial 'évolués'²⁸ and their educated successors. The *banyagihugu*, the peasant 'people of the land' or 'country', represented the vast majority of the population of Burundi at independence. Political assumptions have commonly taken them to be docile subjects, *dominés* to be acted upon by a political class of *dominants*.²⁹ Like Mamdani's influential dichotomy of urban, elite citizens ruling over rural subjects,³⁰ postcolonial politics seems to lie among the former, reproducing colonial dynamics of control over the latter. The two are only truly entangled in moments of mass violence.

A focus on elite politics, and correlate blindness to politics elsewhere, is unsustainable. The complexity of the multifarious processes of decolonisation lies precisely in the links and disjunctions between political leaders and their publics. As David and Catharine Newbury urged and pursued in Rwanda, it is necessary to bring the peasants back in to historical conversations of which they have always been a part.³¹ Yet as historians and anthropologists elsewhere have long since concluded, this is not a question of looking only for dynamics of resistance ('hidden' or otherwise) among the dominated.³² There is a far broader spectrum of

²⁷ René Lemarchand, *Burundi: Ethnic Conflict and Genocide* (Cambridge, 1996).

²⁸ 'Evolved ones', certified by the Belgians to have achieved a sufficient level of European 'civilisation'.

²⁹ See Bayart, *The State*. ³⁰ Mamdani, *Citizen*.

³¹ David Newbury and Catharine Newbury, 'Bringing the Peasants Back in: Agrarian Themes in the Construction and Corrosion of Statist Historiography in Rwanda', *The American Historical Review* 105 (2000); David Newbury, 'Burundi Without Peasants', *The Journal of African History* 31 (1990); Catharine Newbury, *The Cohesion of Oppression: Clientship and Ethnicity in Rwanda, 1860–1960* (New York, NY, 1993).

³² See Lila Abu-Lughod, 'The Romance of Resistance: Tracing Transformations of Power Through Bedouin Women', *American Ethnologist* 17 (1990); Susan Gal, 'Language and the "Arts of Resistance"', *Cultural Anthropology* 10 (1995); Eric