



Politics and Violence in Burundi

Telling the neglected history of decolonisation and violence in Burundi, Aidan Russell examines the political language of truth that drove extraordinary change, from democracy to genocide. By focusing on the dangerous border between Burundi and Rwanda, this study uncovers the complexity from which ethnic ideologies, sidelined before independence in 1962, became gradually all-consuming by 1972.

Framed by the rhetoric and uncertainty of ‘truth’, Russell draws on both African and European language source material to demonstrate how values of authority and citizenship were tested and transformed across the first decade of Burundi’s independence, and a post-colony created in the interactions between African peasants and politicians across the margins of their states.

Culminating with a rare examination of the first postcolonial genocide on the African continent, a so-called ‘forgotten genocide’ on the world stage, Russell reveals how the postcolonial order of central Africa came into being.

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Politics and Violence in Burundi

The Language of Truth in an Emerging State

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*The Graduate Institute of International and
Development Studies, Geneva*



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Contents

<i>List of Figures and Maps</i>	page vi
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	vii
<i>Linguistic and Orthographic Note</i>	ix
<i>Glossary of Terms</i>	xi
<i>List of Abbreviations</i>	xii
Introduction: Talking Politics and Watching the Border	1
Prologue, 1796–1959: People of the Land	39
Part I 1959–1961: ‘To See the Son of a King’	63
1 <i>Ukuri ni kumwe</i> : Talking Truth	65
2 <i>Ibigendajoro</i> : Rebels in the Name of the King	95
Part II 1961–1967: ‘A Most Total Anarchy’	129
3 <i>Abanyabihuha</i> : Talking Loyalty	131
4 <i>Ukuri n’ubutungane</i> : The Fate of the Bourgmestres	166
Part III 1968–1972: ‘Please Send Me a Car to Take Them Away’	195
5 <i>Politiques bw’insaku</i> : Talking Vigilance	197
6 <i>Couper tout ce qui dépasse</i> : Truth and Violence	227
Conclusion: The Court of Baribuka	270
<i>Bibliography</i>	280
<i>Index</i>	304

Figures and Maps

1.1 Mwami Mwambutsa's tract, 16 April 1960	<i>page</i> 83
2.1 Uprona tract, 'I Am Uprona', late 1960	102
2.2 Uprona 'Photo tract', 1961	115
Map 1 Burundi in the 1960s	40
Map 2 Kabarore and Busiga	41
Map 3 Rebel violence and 'target areas' in 1972	234

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Linguistic and Orthographic Note

The national language of Burundi is Kirundi, *ikirundi*. While it is a tonal language, tone is rarely marked in common writing. Many other contemporary orthographic conventions were absent or inconsistent in the 1960s. In this text I reproduce the original orthography of quoted documents without correction or alteration, e.g. *akasozi* for *agasozi*.

Pronunciation: ‘*c*’ generally represents a ‘tch’ sound. The ‘*nt*’ cluster is partly exhaled through the nose. The letters ‘*r*’ and ‘*l*’ are largely phonetically interchangeable, with ‘*r*’ preferred in writing today. The ‘*rw*’ and ‘*bw*’ clusters can have a distinct guttural quality, the latter occasionally written in Protestant traditions as ‘*bg*’.

Nouns: In Kirundi, singular and plural are marked by a changing prefix, notably (*u*)*mu*- for the singular of most words referring to people, and (*a*)*ba*- for the plural. The initial vowel is dropped in certain lexical contexts. When using a Kirundi word in an English sentence I generally privilege the retention of the initial vowel (*ibihuha*, *ukuri*, *ubwenge* etc.), but roughly follow the most common conventions with terms that are today found relatively frequently in English and French-language writing: *mwami* rather than *umwami*, and *bashingantabe* rather than *abashingantabe*, for example. The now-standard English orthography of ‘Tutsi’, ‘Hutu’ and ‘Twa’ is used throughout. As a related social category, the lesser-known ‘Ganwa’ here follows the same pattern, in place of *umuganwalabaganwa*.

Place names: Where these have changed over time, I generally use the name or spelling appropriate to the period under discussion: notably, Usumbura for the colonial period becomes Bujumbura after independence, while Kitega changes to Gitega. ‘Ijene’ is used throughout the book (as it was in writing throughout the 1960s) for the more correct contemporary ‘Jene’.

Personal names: With conversion to Christianity, children in Burundi conventionally received two given names, one Kirundi and one French; progressively, the Kirundi name often became an inherited

family name, but this was far from universal in the 1960s. Practices differed as to which was treated as a ‘first’ name, and the ‘French’ name can be rendered in significantly different (Latin-derived) forms more phonetically suited to a Kirundi speaker. Here I refer to individuals as far as possible in the style they most often appear in archival documents or oral interviews: ‘Bucumi Côme’ (and not ‘Cosima Bucumi’), but ‘Louis Rwagasore’, for example. In the index, all individuals are alphabetised by their Kirundi names.

Glossary of Terms

<i>Abadasigana</i>	‘the devoted ones’; members of the Uprona party
<i>banyagihugu</i>	‘people of the land/country’; peasants sg. <i>munyagihugu</i>
<i>bashingantabe</i>	communal arbitrators, ‘notables’, judges sg. <i>mushingantabe</i>
Batare	sub-dynasty of the royal Ganwa lineage, descended from Mwami Ntare Rugamba
Bezi	sub-dynasty of the royal Ganwa lineage, descended from Mwami Mwezi Gisabo
Ganwa	member(s) of the royal dynasty ‘prince’
<i>guhanura</i>	‘advise, admonish, warn’; a euphemism for political violence
<i>ibigendajoro</i>	‘night-travellers’, accusatory term for political propagandists
<i>ibihuha</i>	‘(false) rumours’
<i>insaku</i>	‘(malevolent) gossip, inquisitiveness, spiteful prying’
<i>inyenzi</i>	lit. ‘cockroaches’; name adopted by Rwandan refugee militants in the early 1960s, later becoming extreme hate speech for all Tutsi
mwami	‘king’
<i>simba</i>	Congolese rebels
Sûreté	State intelligence service
Tutelle	tutelary authority; Belgian government of the UN Trust Territory
<i>ubwenge</i>	‘intelligence, social skill/cleverness, incisive observation, self-mastery’ (see p. 56–7)

List of Abbreviations

Admicom	Administrateur communal
AP	Administrateur de province
Aprosoma	Association pour la promotion sociale de la masse
Commarro	Commissaire d'arrondissement
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
JPN	Jeunesse populaire Ngendandumwe
JRR	Jeunesse révolutionnaire Rwagasore
Parmehutu	Parti du mouvement et de l'émancipation Hutu
PDC	Parti démocrate chrétien
PP	Parti du peuple
TANU	Tanganyika African National Union
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
Uprona	Union et progrès national