

Nigel Watt, the author of this book, is a humanitarian ‘expert’ who worked in Burundi between 1998 and 2002 under the auspices of the two well known NGOs, Christian Aid and CARE International. Prior to that, he had a long stay in Zambia, where he taught at and directed a secondary school in the second half of the 1960s. His objective in writing this book, as he makes it clear in the preface, is to introduce Burundi to the Anglophone world in general and the British public in particular. His thesis is that Burundi is not as well known as its twin brother, Rwanda.

The monograph, which is concerned essentially with the political events of the post-colonial period, is based not only on recent writings on Burundi, but also, and more particularly so, on interviews of about eighty persons, most of them serving in NGOs, conducted in May and June 2006. It consists of twenty short chapters, with an average of about ten pages. Two maps and six photos are given by way of illustrations. A highly sketchy bibliography, followed by a few appendices and an incomplete index of names and places, complete the book.

The book can broadly be divided into three sections with varying levels of development. The first part presents the geographical context, gives a brief historical overview of Burundi until the end of the 19th century and describes some of the transformations that took place during the colonial period. The second part outlines the authoritarian one-party regimes of General Michel Micombero (1966-1976) and Colonel Jean Baptiste Bagaza (1976-1987), the introduction of political pluralism under Major Pierre Buyoya in the early 1990s and the civil war that came in the wake of the assassination of Melchior Ndadaye and lasted from 1993 until the Arusha Accord of 2000. The third part deals with the efforts made to solve this crisis at the national, regional and international levels.

The author begins by inviting the readers to a rapid tour of Burundi, starting with the different quarters of Bujumbura, the capital, then taking them to the ‘interior’ across the Imbo plains in the west, and the central plateaus, which constitute a major section of the country, lingering over what he deemed were the most important tourist sites.

With a view to explaining the conflict and violence that has been the hallmark of Burundi in the past fifty years or so, Nigel Watt found it necessary to review the culture, language, religion and political structures that mark this country as one of the most powerful and best organized in the Great Lakes region between the 16th and 19th centuries. Like other writers on the subject, he tries to discuss the sensitive and complex question of ethnicity. Sensitive because while colonial historiography has emphasized the distinct features of the three main ethnic groups – Hutu, Tutsi and Twa – through their geographical origins, their physical features and economic activities, the post-colonial

regimes by contrast have rejected these divisions and underscored instead their common Burundian identity. Complex because the Burundians use in their language the word *ubwoko*, a term which means kind, sort, type, and not ethnic in the sociological sense. Although he has avoided the danger of falling into the proclivity of most European writers for physical descriptions and sweeping moral judgements, he nonetheless reproduces rather uncritically the statistical data that have gained currency since the beginning of the 20th century, i.e. 85 per cent Hutu, 14 per cent Tutsi and 1 per cent Twa. Nigel Watt does not have much to say about the colonial period. This is a rather serious omission as one can hardly understand the history of post-colonial Burundi without taking into account the profound administrative, political, economic, social and cultural transformations that took place in the colonial period and which have had detrimental consequences on the country’s recent past.

The second part of the book deals with the Michel Micombero and Jean Baptiste Bagaza regimes of the 1970s and 1980s. The period witnessed the 1972 tragedy, when, following armed attacks by Hutu bands coming from Tanzania directed against the Tutsi inhabiting the southern parts of the country and the major cities, Bujumbura and Gitega, the army retaliated with harsh reprisals that decapitated the Hutu intellectual elite. Nigel Watt’s description of these events is based on the recollections of survivors of the catastrophe. However, the sample selected is confined to the Hutu and completely ignores the Tutsi victims. Moreover, the figures of 200,000 Hutu dead and 300,000 refugees (p. 34), is not based on any reliable source.

The Bagaza years are rightly considered as a period of modernization and remarkable economic development characterized by the building of infrastructures in transportation and electricity, reforestation, etc. However, his rule gradually grows harsh as, like his predecessor, he subtly excludes from positions of high office the Hutu and non-southern Tutsi. He also struck at the powerful Catholic Church, an act that precipitated his isolation as he fell out with his neighbours Juvénal Habyarimana of Rwanda and Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaire. His attitude towards foreign missionaries probably contributed to his downfall and his replacement by Major Pierre Buyoya. Notwithstanding the characterization of his regime as

dictatorial (p. 39), on balance Bagaza is generally seen in positive light in comparison with the other rulers of Burundi. One should note that many Hutu leaders returned from exile during his rule, including Melchior Ndadaye (president from July-October 1993), Cyprien Ntaryamira (president from February-April 1994) and Sylvestre Ntibantunganya (president from April-July 1996).

Nigel Watt’s assessment of the Buyoya regime is manifestly critical. This is understandable as this high ‘humanitarian’ official arrived in Burundi in 1998, after the return of Buyoya to power at the request of the military that had overthrown President Sylvestre Ntibantuganya, who took refuge at the US Embassy. Thus, he dismisses his first six years in power (1987-1993) in one page (p. 42). Yet these years witnessed some bold decisions, such as the judicious handling of the bloody events of August 1988 in two communes in the country’s northeast, the setting up of a government of national unity, the open discussion of the ethnic question at all levels, the adoption of the unity charter and the introduction of political pluralism. Buyoya is criticized for rejecting the ‘national conference’ idea that was the vogue among many francophone countries at the time, as if that were the magic wand that would sweep away Burundi’s problems. The author forgot to put the facts in their proper context. For example, the ‘villes mortes’ events organized by the young Tutsi of Bujumbura at the beginning of 1994 did not start from nowhere, as he appears to suggest; they were a direct response to the killings that attended the Hutu rebellion in the Kamenge and Kinama suburbs.

The third part of this book on the recent history of Burundi is mostly concerned with the efforts made by all parties to bring about peace and reconciliation and undertake reconstruction. It deals primarily with the negotiations of the political protagonists at Arusha and the steps taken by NGOs, the media, and international organizations, among others. It was President Julius Nyerere of Tanzania who took the initiative for the negotiations with a view to bringing together around a table Burundi’s main political forces. These negotiations ineffectually dragged on for two years (from June 1998 to August 2000), mainly because the mediocre political elite of Burundi was interested more than anything else in the fat per diems allotted to the various delegations. When Nyerere died on 14 August 1999, the

mediation was entrusted to Nelson Mandela, who used his aura to press the parties to come to a minimum agreement.

Even if the agreement that was finally signed represented a remarkable improvement on the institutional deadlock that had followed the 1993 crisis, they had three important deficiencies that Nigel Watt should have explored further. To begin with, the negotiations, which should have been held inside the country, were ‘exported’ outside to be held under the mediation of ‘wise men’, who turned out to be not at all impartial. It has rightly been pointed out that, although Buyoya had agreed to negotiate, Nyerere did not hesitate to ‘punish’ him by imposing an embargo on him (p. 62). The people of Burundi did not feel affected at all by these talks of the politicians. Secondly, there were some notable absences from these talks, notably representatives of the rebel Hutu National Council for the Defence of Democracy (CNDD), the National Liberation Forces (FLN) and civil society organizations and associations. Thirdly, the Arusha Accord was signed under intense international pressure and with strong reservations from the Tutsi parties on some essential points. Nonetheless, the accord came into effect in November 2001, ushering in a three-year transition period led successively by Pierre Buyoya of the Unity for National Progress Party (UPRONA) and Domitien Ndayizeye of the Burundi Democratic Front (FRODEBU), each staying in power for ten years. The principal lesson of the Arusha Accord is the consecration of ‘ethnicity’ as an incontrovertible element of political governance: the Hutu and the Tutsi had to have proportional representation in the army, government positions, diplomatic postings, etc.

Nigel Watt illustrates with examples the laudable role during the ‘crisis’ of religious organizations, such as the Catholic Relief Service (CRS), active in Burundi since 1961, or the National Council of Churches in Burundi (NCCB), who promoted a culture of peace by facilitating meetings, exchanges and friendliness, all contributing to an atmosphere of peaceful co-existence. He also cited some individual initiatives, the pride of place in this regard being given inevitably to the Maison *Shalom*, established in 1993 by Marguerite Barankitse in Ruyigi, in the east of the country. This lady attained fame by welcoming and educating more than 30,000 orphans of all ethnic origins.

As is noted in the book, Burundi maintains to the present a strong oral tradition: radio transmissions have a great impact on the public all over the country. Private radio stations such Radio *Umwizero*, Radio Publique Africaine or Radio *Isanganiro* have contributed a lot in fostering a culture of peace, tolerance, reconciliation and democracy. Nevertheless, the greatest challenge in the realm of governance, human rights and justice remains the eradication of the culture of impunity

that has prevailed since the early days of independence in 1962. As a result, a perennial climate of fear and mistrust has set in, which has created a psychological block between Hutu and Tutsi and fostered a doublespeak of hypocrisy and lies in order to defend the sectarian interests of one group or the other.

Over and above the political factors that Nigel Watt cites at length to explain the conflict and violence, it is important to recall the economic factors clearly linked to under-development. International

aid, be it multi-lateral or bilateral, is far from alleviating the suffering of the people. In 2009, Burundi was ranked 176th out of 185 countries in the UNDP Human Development Index (HDI).

All in all, Nigel Watt's book has interesting information and analyses of the situation prevalent in Burundi between 1993 and 2007. It will thus have considerable value in the Anglophone world, as is indeed the objective of the author. Unfortunately, however, it has a few errors arising from

the author's ignorance of the sociological realities in Burundi. For instance, *uruvyino* denotes a song, not a traditional dance (p. 17); the Muslims hardly constitute 13 per cent of the population; the royal army was not composed solely of Tutsi, but also included Hutu and Twa (p. 20). The passages referring to 'double genocide' (p. ix) and two versions of Burundi history (p. x) are at the very least highly debatable. Finally, sentences like 'Colonel Bikomagu, the army chief, gave the green light for a *coup* and Ndadaye

was killed' (p. 45), or 'The University of Burundi which has several campuses at Bujumbura and Gitega, is no longer the bastion of Tutsi extremism that it was, though some Hutus hesitate to enrol there' (p. 174) are completely gratuitous. But these are failings that a second edition of the book could easily rectify.

