
The End of the Early State: The Case of Burundi

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Politiquement l'Urundi est une monarchie féodale¹

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The early states all over the world came to an abrupt end owing to the intervention of European, mostly colonial, powers. As soon as these powers got a grip on the traditional political organizations they had the intention to change them. The common terms to designate these organizations were 'primitive states', 'feudal states', 'feudal monarchies' or 'sultanates' as an indication that they were considered to be outmoded and clearly needed to be changed in conformity with the ideals of the modern western state. More recently we speak of the early state with no judgment implied.

One of the first things the colonial powers tried to do was to establish the boundaries of the area they wanted to claim as their territory. This occurred during what has been called the 'scramble for Africa' during which the European powers fought amongst each other to obtain as much territory as possible.

In the case of Burundi, this kingdom together with the neighboring kingdom of Rwanda became at the end of the 19th century part of German East Africa and stayed in that situation up to the World War I. From about 1919 on both kingdoms received the status of a League of Nations Mandate and after the Second World War as a United Nations Trust Territory under the supervision of Belgium.

As to the general characteristics of Burundi, one of the kingdoms of the interlacustrine area in Eastern Africa, one can describe its traditional political organization, following Lemarchand who writes (1970: 27) '...Burundi tended to look at best like a loose aggregate of semi-autonomous chiefdoms; at worst like a cluster of warring principalities'. One could add that Burundi did not have any fixed boundaries many chiefdoms having an uncertain relationship with the king or being rather dependent from the monarch.

Though in the beginning the administration of both kingdoms consisted mainly of military control, the intervention of the colonial authorities almost immediately had profound consequences. The military forces

of the colonial powers tried to establish order and to suppress the wars between the traditional chiefs. As Lemarchand (1970: 49) has written: 'When the Germans arrived in Burundi they found a situation bordering on chaos. Internecine struggles between the ageing king *Mwami* Mwezi Gisabo and the rebellious chiefs had reached the point where power was divided among a host of princely factions'. The German authorities ended by supporting the king, reducing thereby the rather independent position the chiefs enjoyed before that time, though they sometimes also took sides with some rebellious chiefs. The German policy was rather fluctuating but always involved meddling with the internal affairs of the kingdom.

Gradually administrative officers took over from the military and started to introduce with not too much success certain more far reaching measures such as levying taxes and imposing forced labor. The Belgians as the successors of the Germans did not have much respect for their efforts of administering Burundi. According to the Belgian administrator Ryckmans (1953: 46) who had been for some time the 'résident' (governor) of Burundi and who was a connoisseur of its culture and society one could say that: 'Thus, before the Great War the European occupation was clearly bankrupt since it had resulted in the dissolution of a kingdom of which the solid background in traditions, manners, customs and religion had not or only partially been understood'. In reading this statement² it may be good to realize that Belgium and Germany in the time that it was written had been at war and that Belgium had become the new ruler of Burundi.

Ryckmans, who for a long time was very influential in the administration of Burundi, was of the opinion that by undermining the authority of the king (*umwami*) which was what the Germans had tried to do, also the authority of the Belgian mandate authorities was harmed, for the population held the king in high esteem.

Ryckmans arrived in Burundi in 1916 and can be considered as the architect of the Belgian rule over the country. He was a supporter of what the British called the policy of indirect rule, a rather vague notion suggesting that the colonial authority should leave intact as much as possible the system of native government. According to Vijghen (2005), the Belgians did not dispose of sufficient military and administrative forces to ensure order in the country without the help of the local chiefs.

As a matter of fact, the policy of indirect rule had profoundly affected the traditional government of Burundi and Rwanda as well. Quite a few authors like Chrétien (1993), Gahama (1983), Lemarchand (1970), Rumya (1992) and Vijghen (2005) have pointed this out. They have shown that there was little left of the authority of the king and his ritual aura, and of the autonomy or even independence of the chiefs. The king had become a puppet in the hands of the Belgian rulers who also strictly controlled the chiefs who had become civil servants. Most Hutu had been ousted from their functions especially those who acted as royal ritualists. In the years around 1930 an administrative reorganization took place which wholly changed the situation and confirmed the developments which had already taken

place. All the efforts of the Belgian authorities had been directed towards eradicating the supposed abuses of the olden feudal times in order to establish what they called a more civilized state of affairs. This of course implied what we would call today the end of the early state.

Most of the comments have been addressed, however to the developments in the area of the highest authorities, *i.e.* the kings and the chiefs. This has kept out of sight a bit the changes that have taken place at the lower levels of society. These concerned in the case of Burundi the 'sub-chiefs' called *ivyariho*, the local 'judges and counselors' called *abashingantahe* and the level of the local community generally called the '*col-line*', the 'hill'.

When I was in Burundi for the first time, in 1958, the 'sub-chiefs' acted in territories several times larger than those in the ancient times, when generally the territory of a sub-chief comprised no more than a few hundred inhabitants. This enlargement had taken place especially after the administrative reorganization when the Belgian authorities changed many other things. For instance, instead of the sub-chief/*icariho* some functionaries acted as an assistant of the Belgian-style sub-chief and the function of an announcer was instituted. Both functionaries were not formally remunerated but received all kinds of presents from the local population.

Owing to the extension of the sub-chiefdoms the distance between the authorities and the population had grown considerably. Formerly, most sub-chiefs were members and representatives of local lineages and had their roots in the local community. In 1958 they were relative strangers in the community, and often were the sons of the modern style chiefs.

Though these sub-chiefs in the past occupied rather minor functions they represented royalty deep into the interior of the countryside.

Such a link with royalty was formerly provided also by the fact that all local lineages fulfilled a multitude of functions at the royal and princely courts. Most Rundi had spent some time in or near the courts so that the local people were more or less familiar with the life of the rulers of the country. Everywhere I met people who had acted as building constructors, as domestics servants, as cooks, as milkmen and herders, as craftsmen and as field laborers. This implied a very refined system of social differentiation, each person deriving by way of these prestations his or her social status from his relationship to the king or a prince. The Belgian authorities saw this as a system through which the Rundi's were in the past exploited and suppressed. In the new system the population was subjected to a uniform impersonal system of taxes deriving them from all personal contacts with the holders of power.

Another important difference concerns the local notables called *abashingantahe* who played an important role as judges, arbitrators and witnesses of social events. In 1958 they still were active but there had been many efforts from the side of the government to curtail their influence sometimes even to suppress it. These functionaries also had constituted

in the past a link with the central government theoretically at least as representing the king and the princes and invoking their authority. In 1958 each chiefdom had its own tribunal, mostly a building on a special place, far from the houses where the common people lived. The chiefs, a clerk and a few *abashingantahe* were sitting behind an elevated desk separating them from the public. In the past the trials of important matters were held inside the kraal of the king or a prince or, in the case of matters of less importance outside, judges and audience sitting on the ground.

From these few examples it can be concluded that the native authorities had become distant bureaucrats and were getting far removed from the daily life of their subjects. The king had moved his court to a modern palace living for the most part in a western environment. The same was true for the chiefs who from the thirties traveled in automobiles, and dressed themselves in western style clothes. They received salaries in money according to uniform standards.

Besides the changes brought about by the Belgian presence in Burundi in the original Rundi political organization, there was also the major influence of the mostly Roman Catholic Mission. Though it took some time before the missionaries succeeded in eradicating what they called the heathen beliefs of the Rundi's, in the end a large proportion of the population was Christianized. Everywhere in the country the mission stations with churches, monasteries, schools, hospitals and workshops dominated the landscape. On Sundays and other religious occasions like Christmas and Holy Communion crowds of peoples flooded to the churches.

As much as possible the missionaries had suppressed the Rundi rituals as for instance those of the cult of a spirit called Kiranga. They even collaborated with the Belgian administration to make an end to the national annual royal ritual of *umuganuro* in which the Kiranga cult played an important role.

Besides the contents of the influence the missionaries exerted on the thinking and the beliefs of the Rundi people, the fact that they were strangers – Belgians, Germans, French, Dutch – implied that completely foreign persons had taken in hand the public manifestations of religion. Even the fact that later on many Rundi priests were taking over from the European missionaries as the religious leaders of the country, did not change very much. They were men educated in western learning and western ways of thinking and were in many respects estranged from their local roots. In my experience in 1958 (I think that today the situation is different) Rundi priests were even more strict in their rejection of native beliefs than the white missionaries were.

The question I want to discuss on the basis of these few examples of the effects of the European rule over Burundi is to what extent these can be related to the fact that traditional Burundi originally was an early state. As we have seen very much of the old system was destroyed but one wonders what has been left of the old situation.

I want to state that one of the first things I remarked when I came to Burundi was that though it was clearly a very unequal society, in daily life

the distance between the authorities and the common people was not as great as one would have expected. Chiefs and commoners acted and spoke to each other in a familiar way looking to outsiders as if they were equals. Also, when asked about their origin they always referred to the chief of the region who was reigning there rather than to the geographical location.

Related to this came that the Belgians had changed very much also in the composition and way of acting of the political staff – removing, discharging, controlling and correcting the chiefs and sub-chiefs – the principle of a chief staying in his hereditary function during his whole life had remained intact. This meant that the chief came to know the social situation in his chiefdom very well, leaving him many opportunities to manipulate things outside the control of the Belgians, who could not be present in the field every day.

This personal element in the early state of Burundi cannot be stressed enough. In the colonial state that came later much of it was suppressed but up to a point it stayed alive.

NOTES

¹ Politically, Burundi is a feudal monarchy.

² Ainsi à la veille de la guerre, l'occupation européenne était en faillite avouée, parce qu'elle avait travaillé à désagréer un royaume dont on méconnaissait ou ignorait la base solide dans les traditions, les moeurs et la religion du peuple...

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