

**Hutu and Tutsi:
The Battle for Burundi**

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For hundreds of years, the Hutu and Tutsi people of Central Africa have been struggling with their ethnic differences, resulting in numerous bloodsheds and wars. Stemming from traditional society, and seemingly magnified by colonial activity, this ethnic strife has remained an unconquered problem plaguing the countries in which they live. The history of one such country, Burundi, provides fantastic storylines of the bloody struggles between the Hutu and Tutsi, two groups culturally alike, torn apart by their perceived differences.

Burundi and the People Within

Burundi, a small, landlocked country in Central Africa is home to approximately 6.8 million people. Burundi, along with much of the surrounding area, is almost entirely inhabited by three ethnic groups, the Twa, the Hutu (Bahutu), and the Tutsi, which have lived in the area for centuries.

Demographically, the Twa make up 1%, the Hutu 85%, and the Tutsi 14%, of Burundi's population.

The original recorded inhabitants of Burundi were the Twa, a short, pygmy people who likely subsisted on a system of hunting and gathering. Perhaps as early as the 1st century, the Twa were displaced by the agriculturist Hutu. The Hutu outnumbered the Twa and subsequently dominated the area with a series of small kingdoms until the 15th century (Wikipedia – Hutu, 2004).

In the 15th century, it is believed that Tutsi people entered the area from northeast Africa. Traditionally pastoralists, the Tutsi herded cattle to central Africa and brought strong warrior traditions. The Tutsi took control of the area which is

now Burundi and created several small kingdoms, overruling both the Twa and Hutu.

“In the 16th century, Burundi was a kingdom characterized by a hierarchical political authority and tributary economic exchange. A king (*mwani*) headed a princely aristocracy (*ganwa*) which owned most of the land and required a tribute, or tax, from local farmers and herders. In the mid-18th century, this Tutsi royalty consolidated authority over land, production, and distribution with the development of the *ubugabire*—a patron-client relationship in which the populace received royal protection in exchange for tribute and land tenure.” (U.S. Department of State – Burundi, 2004) By the 19th cent., the country was ruled by the *mwami* (king)—a Tutsi who controlled the other Tutsis of the region in a vassal relationship (Infoplease Encyclopedia – Burundi History, 2004).

Within the aforementioned political structure, the majority Hutu were ruled by the minority Tutsi. It has been said that “for many Hutu, the logic of numbers offers a devastating commentary on the methods used by the Tutsi minority to place the majority of the population into bondage. Only through deceit and ruse could the Tutsi assert their political hegemony over a vastly more numerous population” (Lemarchand, 1994, p. 6). Despite this seemingly troublesome situation, it is thought that during traditional pre-colonial times, the Tutsi and Hutu lived together in relative peace.

It is interesting to note that “there is no difference between the culture and language of the Tutsi and Hutu” (Wikipedia – Tutsi). Genetically speaking, Tutsi and Hutu are nearly identical, and “traditionally the rate of intermarriage has been very high” (Wikipedia – Tutsi). In fact, “most Burundians claim that they cannot

distinguish an individual as Hutu or Tutsi dependably on appearance alone” (Eller, 2002, p. 200). This leads some scholars to argue that the terms Hutu and Tutsi were used in pre-colonial times to refer to social class within society rather than lineal descent. Thus a Tutsi cast in the role of a client vis-à-vis a wealthier patron would be referred to as “Hutu”, even though his cultural identity remained Tutsi (Lemarchand, p. 10).

The extent to which the terms Hutu and Tutsi accurately define the ethnic background of an individual should not be dwelled upon, as it is still under much debate. The important detail is that in pre-colonial Burundi, the society was comprised of the ruling Tutsi and laboring Hutu. Status, not ethnic identity was the principle determinant of rank and privilege (Lemarchand, p. 10). Within this society, there was the chance for social mobility, and “relations between the groups were generally peaceful” (Wikipedia – Tutsi).

Colonialism, New Causes for Hatred

Beginning in the later parts of the 19th century, European influences began to take hold of the area, ultimately resulting in Burundi being incorporated into German East Africa in 1890. Aggressive Hutu and Tutsi “segregation began with the advent of the colonialist and every detail of it exposed its perfidious, inhuman, and racist nature” (Scherrer, 2002, p. 27). “The colonial administration emphasized each individual’s identity, and then ascribed social values to each tribe: the Tutsi were perceived as innate rulers, wily and aristocratic, and the history of Burundi was believed to be the history of the Tutsi. The Hutu were perceived as boorish workers who feared and respected the Tutsi as their masters.” Although there was previously some separation, the colonialists

greatly widened the gap between the Hutu and Tutsi, “with the Hutu being left far behind” (Weinstein & Schrire, 1976, p. 8).

After the 1st World War, control of Burundi was passed from Germany to Belgium. Instead of improving the situation, Belgium colonialism furthered social reforms that “served to solidify ethnic categories and intensify ethnic stratification” (Eller, p. 212). Specifically, Belgium implemented a series of chiefdoms in Burundi, and chose Tutsi to lead the chiefdoms. Under such a system, “Tutsi was evolving to become synonymous with power and high status and Hutu to become synonymous with subordination and exclusion” (Eller, p. 213). Issuing an additional blow, in 1931, Belgium introduced ethnic identity cards as if to further solidify the ethnosocial groups.

On July 1, 1962 Burundi achieved full independence. At the head of the newly independent Burundi was a Tutsi king, King Mwambutsa IV, who established a constitutional monarchy consisting of an equal number of both Hutu and Tutsi members. However, Mwambutsa was reluctant to share power, and in the years following independence “Tutsi supremacy was questioned with growing intensity” (Weinstein et al., p. 10).

Growing Resentment

Largely due to colonial impacts, a deep ethnic hatred had developed between the Tutsi and Hutu. More than sixty years of colonial rule had consistently resulted in the Tutsi being favored over the Hutu. Burundi had been transformed from its comparatively peaceful traditional setting, to an independent kingdom built on shaky politics. Nestled within this system, we find the majority Hutu, once again feeling subjugated and dismissed.

The Attempted Coup of 1965

In an attempt to quell growing distrust in the crown, King Mwambutsa called a legislative election in 1965. A Hutu candidate emerged from the election with 23 seats out of 33 in Burundi's National Assembly. Seeing these results, the Hutu deputies expected that a Hutu prime minister would be appointed. But instead, King Mwambutsa appointed his personal secretary to prime minister. The news came as a shock to many Hutu deputies, and when their alternative choices were turned down, their consternation turned to anger (Lemarchand, p. 70).

On the 18th of October, 1965, infuriated by the election outcome, "a group of Hutu army officers mounted a coup against the king" (Eller, p. 231). The group killed the falsely appointed prime minister and made an attempted attack on the royal palace. Army troops loyal to the king were brought in and forced the mutineers to surrender. Seeing his rule in jeopardy, King Mwambutsa panicked and fled the country, leaving his son, Ntare V, a young, incapable prince, in charge of Burundi.

In retaliation for this event, the army executed the thirty-four members of the coup, and then proceeded to launch attacks on almost any Hutu in a position of power. "Hutus were virtually purged from the ranks of the army, Hutu politicians and officials were arrested and some shot, and mutual acts of terrorism were conducted in the countryside, with the army rounding up and killing innocent Hutus" (Eller, p. 231).

The attempted coup of 1965 was unsuccessful, and the retribution had resulted in the deaths of as many as 5000 Hutus. With so many empty spots in

the country's government, the army, led by Capt. Michel Micombero (a Tutsi), was in a position of great power. A short time later, Micombero, with the help of the army, overthrew the young king only a few months after his crowning. With the king deposed, Burundi was declared a republic, with a government staffed mostly by Tutsi and Micombero as prime minister.

The Aborted Coup of 1972

The period following 1965 was marked with continued civil unrest and small scale outbreaks of ethnic violence. The Hutu continued to struggle under a mainly Tutsi government, whilst within the government, the Tutsi elite struggled to retain Tutsi dominance. Burundi was once again becoming ripe with ethnic hatred and fear.

In April of 1972, a crisis broke out when groups of Hutu rebels launched attacks on Tutsi citizens, aimed at achieving a coup. The initial revolt resulted in 2,000 Tutsi losing their lives to the Hutu rebels. Tutsi elite panicked at the outbreak of violence, and in the weeks and months that followed the uprising a brutal repression took place, carried out with the coordination of Burundi's army, armed gangs of Tutsi youths...and hastily trained vigilante groups (Weinstein et al., p. 19).

The same fears – not only ethnic fears but more strictly political ones – led to the characteristically disproportionate government reaction to the unrest. In parts of the country Hutus were indiscriminately massacred. In other parts the purge was more systematic: “intellectuals,” which includes teachers, students, or any Hutu with any education, were singled out. (Eller, p. 234)

As many as 200,000 Hutu were killed in retaliation for the uprising, and tens of thousands of Burundians fled the country in fear. This disproportionate quantity serves as a sharp reminder of the insecurity the ruling Tutsi felt. It has been said that, “many Burundian Tutsi now saw the Hutu as *the* enemy” (Eller, p. 235), and that “the killing of Hutu seemed to have become part of the civic duty expected of every Tutsi citizen” (Lemarchand, p. 98).

The Current Situation

Throughout the 70s, 80s, and into the early 90s, trouble between the Hutu and Tutsi continued, but to a slightly lesser extent. Surely, the utter defeat and resultant fright of the Hutu led to over a decade of unchallenged hegemony in Burundi (Eller, p. 235). There were several changes in government organization and some smaller instances of ethnic violence, but the Tutsi maintained the upper hand, in many cases due to their continued control over the army.

In 1993, elections were held and resulted in the peaceful placement of a Hutu president. A short time later, in an effort to oust the newly elected president, the predominantly Tutsi army staged a coup. Although the coup was unsuccessful, the army did succeed in killing the president, forcing the government to find a replacement. The role of president was filled by another Hutu, who later dies in an airplane crash in Rwanda while flying with the Rwandan president. It is rumored that the plane was shot down by Tutsi rebels.

In response to the loss of the president, the Hutu started killing Tutsi, once again inciting the Tutsi controlled army to violence. A third Hutu is placed as president, but he is unable to control the army and Burundi plunges into its current civil war.

Trapped in a civil war, stability in Burundi, particularly in regard to ethnic tensions, continues to be an issue Burundi cannot seem to resolve. Ethnic violence is still a hot topic in the area, a stumbling block for Burundi political issues. The transitional government currently in place is working on a power-sharing agreement aimed at equalizing Tutsi and Hutu power, but so far, no final solution has been achieved.

Final Thoughts

History is said to repeat itself, and this has certainly been the case in Burundi's past. The ethnic violence in Burundi has no doubt had a horrendous impact on both the Hutu and Tutsi people, and a solution must be found if the two groups are to continue. Perhaps in the future they will realize that in fact, they are all Burundians, and let this fact be a life-saving common ground on which they can build a peaceful coexistence.

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