A Synopsis of Burundi's History and Cultural Backgrounds

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Let me begin by talking about my country, Burundi. Many people who read this essay may know little about it and may even search for it before continuing. Burundi is a small, landlocked country in the Great Lakes region of Africa. It is bordered by Rwanda, Tanzania, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and its southwestern border reaches Lake Tanganyika. Its size on a map can make it appear insignificant, but its history, language, traditions, political struggles, and hopes are deeply meaningful to the people who call it home. My purpose in sharing this background is not only to describe Burundi as a country that has experienced poverty and conflict. It is also to explain the values, responsibilities, and determination that growing up in Burundi has developed in me (Chrétien, 2003).

My people have lived in this region for centuries. Before European colonization, Burundi existed as an organized kingdom with a monarch, court, cattle-owning elites, agricultural communities, and social institutions that connected different parts of the territory. The kingdom was not free of inequality or conflict, but it possessed its own political traditions and was not an empty territory waiting to be created by colonial rule. Germany incorporated Burundi into German East Africa near the end of the nineteenth century. After Germany's defeat in the First World War, Belgium administered Ruanda-Urundi under a League of Nations mandate and later a United Nations trusteeship. Belgium did not rule Burundi in coordination with Germany, as the earlier version of this essay stated. German authority had ended, and Belgian colonial administration introduced its own institutions while reshaping existing social categories and political relationships (Lemarchand, 1996).

From Kingdom to Independence

Burundi gained independence on July 1, 1962, initially as a constitutional monarchy. Independence created hope, but the new state inherited a fragile political system and divisions intensified by colonial administration. Political assassination, military intervention, competition for state power, and ethnic violence destabilized the country. The monarchy was abolished in 1966, and military governments dominated much of the following period. Episodes of mass violence, particularly in 1972 and 1993, killed large numbers of people and left lasting trauma. After the assassination of President Melchior Ndadaye in 1993, Burundi entered a civil war that continued for more than a decade (Uvin, 2009).

The violence is sometimes described through simple opposition between Hutu and Tutsi, but the

history is more complicated than the idea of two communities naturally destined to fight. Colonial authorities hardened social classifications and distributed education and administrative opportunities unequally. After independence, leaders manipulated fear and identity in struggles over the army, government, land, and security. Ordinary families experienced the consequences through displacement, death, lost schooling, destroyed livelihoods, and distrust. Understanding this history matters because lasting peace cannot be built by repeating stereotypes. It requires institutions that protect every citizen, acknowledge suffering across communities, and prevent leaders from turning identity into a weapon.

The Arusha Peace and Reconciliation Agreement of 2000 helped create a framework for power sharing and political transition, although conflict and political tension did not disappear immediately. The postwar period brought new institutions, elections, and opportunities for reconstruction, but Burundi continues to face serious challenges involving poverty, limited infrastructure, political space, food insecurity, access to healthcare, population pressure, and employment. The country's development cannot be separated from the damage caused by repeated violence. A child who loses years of education, a farmer who leaves land during conflict, or a woman who becomes responsible for a household without access to credit experiences history in daily life.

Culture Beyond Conflict

Burundi should not be introduced only through war and poverty. The country has a rich cultural life grounded in family, community, language, music, dance, storytelling, farming, and respect for social relationships. Kirundi is spoken widely and helps create a strong sense of national identity. French and English are also used in education, administration, regional cooperation, and international communication, while Swahili is important in commerce and some urban communities. The wide use of Kirundi is particularly significant because it gives Burundians a shared language even when political leaders have emphasized division.

Traditional drumming is one of Burundi's best-known cultural expressions. The royal drums historically carried political and ceremonial meaning, and performances remain powerful symbols of collective memory and national identity. Drumming is not merely entertainment. Rhythm, movement, formation, and call-and-response communicate discipline and belonging. Dance and song are also present at weddings, community celebrations, and public ceremonies. These traditions remind me that culture can preserve continuity even when political institutions fail.

Cattle have historically represented more than economic wealth in Burundi. They have been associated with status, relationships, exchange, and social identity, while most households have depended heavily on agriculture. Families grow crops such as beans, maize, cassava, bananas, and sweet potatoes, and coffee has long been an important export. Farming knowledge is passed through generations, but small landholdings, changing weather, limited finance, soil pressure, and market instability make rural life difficult. Development policy must therefore respect the intelligence of

farmers while improving access to tools, storage, transport, irrigation, information, and fair prices.

Burundian culture also emphasizes hospitality and social responsibility. Visitors are welcomed, food is shared when possible, and family obligations extend beyond the nuclear household. These relationships can provide support where formal welfare systems are weak. At the same time, strong family obligations may create pressure when one employed person supports many relatives. Cultural values should not be romanticized, but they are essential resources for rebuilding communities.

Education as My Way Forward

From a young age, I understood that the way forward for me and for my country was education. I watched people struggle for power and saw how violence could destroy lives without creating lasting progress. A person may seize an office or command fear for a period, but intimidation does not build schools, improve public health, create employment, or prepare a society for the future. I wanted to become a leader who influences growth through public welfare, knowledge, and service rather than through force.

This conviction led me to study political science and international relations. I wanted to understand how states work, why institutions fail, how peace agreements are negotiated, how regional organizations cooperate, and how public policy affects people who may never meet the officials making decisions. Studying politics did not teach me that government alone can solve every problem. It taught me that law, administration, civil society, business, education, and local leadership must reinforce one another. A good policy without implementation remains a document, while community action without supportive institutions may remain small and vulnerable.

Education has personal value because it expands the choices available to an individual, but its national value is greater. An educated population can evaluate public claims, demand accountability, adopt new agricultural or business practices, provide healthcare, teach children, and build organizations. Education also allows people from a country such as Burundi to represent themselves rather than depend on outsiders to explain who they are. I want my academic experience to help me return knowledge to communities that have had limited access to it.

Leadership Through Student Organizations

During my time as a student, I established organizations whose primary goal was to help people without placing profit at the center of every activity. I did not create these groups merely to add titles to my résumé. I wanted to test whether young people could organize, identify a problem, mobilize resources, and complete useful work. Leadership became practical when plans had to be explained, disagreements managed, tasks assigned, and results evaluated.

My efforts were recognized when I was invited to serve as vice president of the East African

Community Student Union. This organization represents students from across East Africa and requires cooperation among people with different national, linguistic, academic, and cultural backgrounds. The experience taught me that regional identity does not erase national identity. Instead, it creates a larger framework in which students can share problems and solutions involving education, employment, mobility, peace, and development.

Working in a regional student organization also demonstrated the importance of listening. A leader may enter a meeting believing that one issue is most urgent, only to discover that members face different constraints. Some students struggle with fees, some with documentation, others with language, discrimination, or lack of professional opportunity. Leadership is not the ability to speak the longest. It is the ability to understand different needs, establish priorities, and create a process in which people trust that their concerns will not be ignored.

Supporting Women Facing Poverty and Abuse

I used my knowledge and experience to help women in my country who were experiencing physical and emotional abuse and who lacked economic independence. Poverty was not the only cause of abuse, but it often increased vulnerability. A woman with no income, savings, property, or safe place to go may remain in a harmful situation because leaving could expose her children to hunger or homelessness. Economic opportunity cannot replace legal protection, healthcare, counseling, and social change, but it can expand a woman’s choices.

The women I met wanted to work. They did not need someone to tell them that they were helpless. They needed access to education, financing, planning, markets, and confidence in their own abilities. I sat with them and listened. I asked what skills they already possessed, what goods or services were needed in their communities, what responsibilities limited their time, and what risks they feared. This listening stage was essential because development fails when an outsider chooses a business without understanding the person expected to operate it.

After identifying strengths and opportunities, we provided guidance and secured financing for small enterprises. Of the twenty-eight businesses supported, twenty-six succeeded and two failed. I do not hide the failures because they were part of the learning process. A responsible program should ask why an enterprise failed: Was the market too small? Was the cost underestimated? Did illness, family responsibility, transport, or lack of working capital create difficulty? Failure is not proof that the woman lacked ability. It provides evidence that the design, timing, or support may need adjustment.

The success of twenty-six enterprises showed that women who are excluded from formal finance can manage productive activity when support is matched to their circumstances. The businesses generated income, but their value extended further. Earning money can increase bargaining power within a household, help children remain in school, pay for healthcare, and create respect in the community. One successful woman can also teach another, multiplying the original investment.

The Meaning of Development to Me

Development is often described through national income, roads, electricity, exports, or foreign investment. These indicators matter, but my experience has taught me that development must also be measured through human capability. Can a woman leave an abusive home safely? Can a child attend school without hunger? Can a farmer sell at a fair price? Can a young person find work without political connections? Can citizens disagree with leaders without fear? These questions reveal whether economic growth is improving freedom and dignity.

Burundi remains a low-income country with a large agricultural population and limited formal employment. The World Bank estimates that agriculture still supports most of the workforce, while poverty remains widespread. Yet describing Burundi only through low statistics can create the impression that its people are passive recipients of help. My experience shows the opposite. People possess skills, ambitions, networks, and ideas. What they often lack are institutions that make effort productive: reliable electricity, roads, credit, education, security, transparent administration, and access to markets (World Bank, 2026).

I believe development requires both public and private action. Government must protect rights, provide basic services, maintain infrastructure, and create predictable rules. Businesses can generate employment and innovation, but they should not exploit workers or political weakness. Civil society can identify neglected needs and hold institutions accountable. Educational institutions prepare the people who will operate all these systems. No single leader can develop a country alone.

What I Would Bring to a College Community

My background would allow me to contribute a perspective shaped by a country many students may know only through a brief news report. I can speak about the consequences of conflict, but I can also speak about cultural continuity, regional cooperation, entrepreneurship, and the practical work of helping women establish businesses. I would bring questions that arise from experience: How can peace agreements change everyday institutions? How can development programs respect local knowledge? How can education create leaders who do not repeat the mistakes of earlier generations?

I would also bring a willingness to learn. My experience in Burundi does not make me an expert on every African country or every development challenge. East Africa contains different histories and political systems, and the wider world offers approaches I have not yet encountered. College would give me access to research, mentors, classmates, and methods that can improve my work. I want my existing experience to be challenged and refined rather than simply praised.

The community would gain a student who does not separate ideas from action. I have organized students, accepted responsibility in a regional union, listened to women facing difficult circumstances, helped secure financing, and evaluated both successful and unsuccessful enterprises. These

experiences have taught me persistence, but also humility. Good intentions are not enough. A leader must measure results, accept criticism, correct errors, and remain accountable to the people affected.

My Leadership Philosophy

A familiar proverb says, “Give a person a fish and you feed that person for a day; teach a person to fish and you feed that person for a lifetime.” The principle has influenced me because education and skills can create independence. However, my experience has added another lesson: teaching someone to fish is not enough when the river is privately controlled, the market is inaccessible, or the person cannot obtain a net. Development must build individual capability and remove institutional barriers.

I do not believe leadership is proven by possessing power. Anyone with weapons, money, or political connections may force obedience. Courage is demonstrated by building something valuable where resources are limited, sharing knowledge, and creating opportunities that remain after the leader leaves. Leadership also requires accepting that the people being helped possess knowledge the leader does not have.

My goal is to influence Burundi’s growth through education, public service, ethical institutions, and practical economic opportunity. I want to contribute to a country in which political competition does not lead to violence, women can participate fully in the economy, and young people do not feel that emigration is their only path to a dignified life. This goal is ambitious, but the small enterprises I helped support taught me that large change begins with specific actions.

Conclusion

Burundi’s history includes an independent kingdom, German and Belgian colonial rule, independence in 1962, monarchy, coups, mass violence, civil war, and difficult reconstruction. Those events have contributed to poverty and underdevelopment, but they do not define the complete identity of the country. Kirundi language, drumming, agriculture, family networks, hospitality, and community responsibility continue to shape Burundian life.

My response to this history has been to pursue education and service. I studied political science and international relations, established nonprofit-oriented student organizations, served as vice president of the East African Community Student Union, and helped women develop income-generating businesses. Twenty-six of twenty-eight enterprises succeeded, while the two failures provided lessons about risk and support.

These experiences show that I am not interested only in discussing change. I am prepared to listen, organize, act, evaluate, and learn. I would bring to a college community the perspective of Burundi together with a commitment to regional cooperation and practical leadership. If the institution seeks

students who can connect academic knowledge with public responsibility, I believe my history and future goals make me a strong fit.

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