



SYMPOSIUM

BURUNDI IN EAST AFRICA: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

Freiburg, 18. - 19. November 2024

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From 18 to 19 November 2024, a scientific symposium on Burundi was held in Freiburg, Germany, under the central theme "Burundi in East Africa: opportunities and challenges". Part of a wide-ranging programme of events, the symposium on Burundi brought together over forty participants from Germany, Burundi, East Africa and Europe.

Ceremonies to mark the 40th anniversary of the partnership between Baden-Württemberg and Burundi

The symposium was organised by the University Network for Global Partnerships Baden-Württemberg (GloPart), the Africa Centre for Transregional Research (ACT) at the University of Freiburg and the Arnold-Bergstraesser-Institut (ABI), as part of the celebrations marking the 40th anniversary of the partnership between Baden-Württemberg and Burundi

On the evening of 18 November 2024, a public debate was held on the fringes of the symposium under the theme: "Global partnerships - challenges and prospects for universities and civil society. 40 years of partnership between Baden-Württemberg and Burundi". The event was highlighted by speeches from various political actors, including Her Excellency Annonciata Sendazirasa, Ambassador of the Republic of Burundi to Germany (video message), Nadyne Saint-Cast, Member of the Landtag of Baden-Württemberg, and State Secretary Rudi Hoogvliet. During both the welcome speeches and the round-table discussions, all the speakers emphasised how the partnership between Baden-Württemberg and Burundi could be strengthened, improved and made more concrete in various sectors.



The aim of the symposium

The aim of the symposium was to situate Burundi in the wider context of East Africa and thus to contextualise the partnership historically and regionally. At the same time, emphasis was on exchanges and networking with and between Burundian and Tanzanian researchers. Overall, the symposium was targeted at researchers from East Africa and Europe, as well as people and institutions active in the partnership between Burundi and Baden-Württemberg.

Topics covered

The symposium was divided into five successive panels.

Panel 1: German colonialism in East Africa and colonial remembrance: looking back, looking forward

Panel 2: Perspectives on repatriation and restitution from Germany to former German East African colonies

Panel 3: Current political developments in Burundi

Panel 4: Peace, conflict and refugees - Burundi and its neighbors

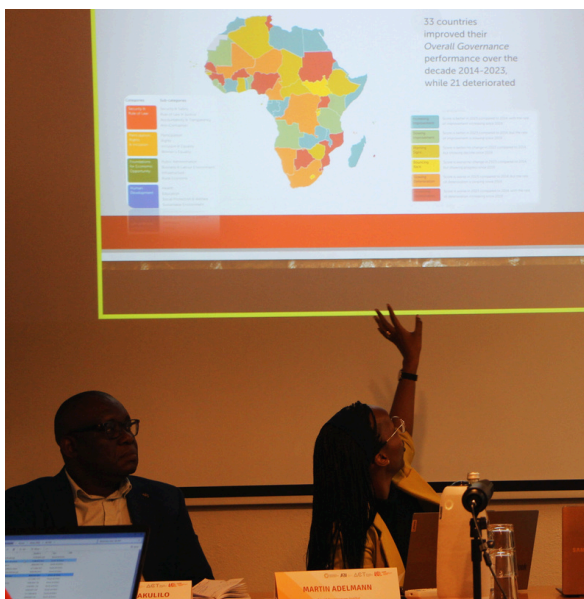
Panel 5: Burundi, Germany and relations with the East African Community

The event was held in English and French. In addition to the participants on site, people connected live from Burundi, Tanzania and Europe.

Panel 1: German colonialism in East Africa and colonial remembrance: looking back, looking forward

In what was then German East Africa, Burundi was administered with a kind of special status, as was Rwanda. From a metropolitan point of view, Burundi was a marginal possession, although the obsession with controlling the sources of the Nile generated a particular interest in Burundi. German efforts to conquer, control and exploit the colony focused first on the coast, then on what was considered particularly valuable in the hinterland of what is now Tanzania.

During the presentations and debates on this first panel, it became clear that this 'marginality' is still expressed in research today: on both the Burundian and German sides, there are still major 'blind spots' in the study of the German colonial period in Burundi. Recently, efforts have been made to strengthen research and remembrance (see, for example, the recent publication by Baumann, Niyonkuru, Birantamije, Bendel, Maruhukiro 2024[1]), however, the debate is still in its infancy. A comparative perspective may prove useful. Indeed, the comparison between the two countries, Burundi and Tanzania, which took different paths during and after the German colonial period, seems particularly fascinating. The symposium demonstrated this in exemplary fashion, with historical interdependencies illustrating the knowledge potential of such an approach.



The panel also discussed some of the main characteristics of German colonial rule and its timeline, including experimentation with the English model of "indirect rule", the contradictory approaches to the administration of Burundi by the German colonial power, the introduction of a new currency and central markets in Usumbura and Gitega, the advent of railways and steamships, as well as the introduction of the first Western schools and the proselytising of Christian churches. In addition to the violence of the German colonisers, the Burundian population also suffered famines caused by colonial conquest and locust invasions, as well as the spread of sleeping sickness.

Although the German occupation of Burundi lasted only about twenty years (1896-1916), its legacy has remained firmly rooted in the memory and in the social, political and even economic life of the Burundian people. In addition to its oft-discussed role in the politicisation and consecration of identities described as "ethnic", it also manifests itself in concepts (e.g. amahera), buildings, individual places of memory and much more besides.

The impact of colonialism was also discussed at a more general level, particularly in terms of its effects on current notions of 'borders', the concept of 'knowledge' and the accepted forms of 'knowledge', as well as the persistence of Eurocentrism in our thinking and research.

[1] Baumann, Niyonkuru, Birantamije, Bendel, Maruhukiro 2024 (Eds./Hg.): Burundi et son passé colonial. Mémoire, enjeu et solde en débat / Burundi und seine koloniale Vergangenheit. Erinnerung, Problematik und Bilanz in der Debatte; <https://lit-verlag.de/isbn/978-3-643-15305-0/>

Following the end of Belgian colonial rule and Burundi's accession to independence, Germany and Burundi also restructured their bilateral relations, which evolved into diversified cooperation in a number of areas, including inter-university cooperation. Today, when talking about German-Burundian relations, it would not be wrong to speak of a "past that is rather present" (Alexandre Hatungimana). The question of what the joint colonial history means for the partnership between Baden-Württemberg and Burundi thus remained present in the discussions. Hence, participants discussed what would be necessary and appropriate steps to promote a deeper understanding of the colonial history and, at the same time, to design a partnership that does not perpetuate post-colonial structures and inequalities.



Panel 2 : Perspectives on repatriation and restitution from Germany to former German East African colonies

Anyone wishing to situate the partnership between Burundi and Baden-Württemberg in broader categories must take into account the recent reorientation of bilateral relations between Germany and Tanzania. This applies in particular to the bilaterally constructed culture of remembrance, which has received particular attention in recent years. This topic was the focus of panel 2. German and Tanzanian actors have held very concrete discussions and negotiations on the return of art objects to German museums. The repatriation of ancestors/"human remains", some of which are held in university "collections", and related reparations have also been discussed. On the Tanzanian side, there are efforts by the government to create a framework for restitution, an active civil society and scientific expertise on these subjects. Numerous research projects on the provenance of cultural belongings have been carried out in cooperation between German and Tanzanian actors. Although no restitution has yet been carried out, this emerging openness on the part of German institutions is enabling new forms of cooperation with the communities of origin. From the participants' point of view, it was emphasised that if community knowledge and experience are taken into account and cooperation takes place in partnership, provenance research, restitution and repatriation can lead to better relations between the countries of origin and the institutions that currently store cultural belongings and "ancestral remains".

A comparable exchange cannot yet be observed for Burundi, where the restitution and repatriation of cultural heritage is not a priority of bilateral cooperation. Nor are there any known attempts by the Burundian government to create legislation along these lines. Burundian museums are also underfunded. To date, there have been no restitutions to Burundi and no direct contact between Burundi and German museums in this matter. Nor is the scientific expertise in Burundi on these subjects yet comparable to that in the neighbouring country.

While a considerable number of Burundian cultural belongings can be found in German collections (i.e. in museums, private collections, university collections and archives), their number is far lower than that of Tanzanian cultural assets. Provenance research for these collections is still in its early stages. It is also not yet known whether the remains of Burundian ancestors can be found in German collections - the frequent classification "East African origin" does not allow firm conclusions.



During the symposium, it was emphasised that Burundi's tangible cultural heritage - in comparison with various neighbouring countries - is largely limited to everyday objects. On the other hand, Burundi has a very rich intangible heritage (e.g. musical, dance and literary traditions, sound recordings, transcriptions of oral traditions, photos and films, etc.) which is often not sufficiently taken into account in discussions. This highlights the central role of archives. At present, much of Burundi's intangible heritage can be found in archives outside Burundi.[2]

Overall, it was clear that the comparative perspective is also very valuable in this area. In particular, it became evident that discussions about restitution do not take place in a political vacuum and also have the potential to create political conflicts between different actors (for example, between government and civil society, in other cases there exist competing claims to legitimacy). The participants agreed on the importance of not understanding "restitution" as a simple act of "giving back", but of keeping an eye on the process and focusing on local discussions, the concerns of the communities of origin, as well as local demands.

Panel 3: Current political developments in Burundi

Burundi's thorny experience of a multi-party system, which degenerated into a long and brutal civil war, created the basis of a new start based on consociational devices in its constitution – quite distinct of what other East African states have adopted. This did not preclude authoritarian practices at the beginning of the 21st century. The degree of democracy or oppression strongly influences a partnership such as the one between Burundi and Baden-Württemberg, also the facet of university cooperation, where freedom of expression is of paramount importance.



[2] At its retreat on 31 July 2020, the Senate of Burundi expressly requested that the Burundian archives in Germany be identified and repatriated.

Panel 3 therefore looked at recent internal political developments in Burundi. It became clear that authoritarian tendencies have persisted even after the election of President Ndayishimiye in 2020. Speakers described widespread repression of the opposition, systematic restrictions on political and civil liberties, and massive restrictions on the media. Many sources reported intimidation, illegal detentions, torture and arbitrary killings. These developments are also reflected in various indicators of the system of governance and political and civil liberties (such as Freedom House or the Bertelsmann Transformation Index).

Due to the repressive practices of the government and the hegemonic rule of the ruling CNDD-FDD party, as well as a weak, divided and underfunded opposition, Burundi has been described as a de facto one-party state. This means that it is an unbalanced and unequal multi-party system in terms of the enjoyment of rights on the ground, the treatment of members of the various parties and the allocation of financial resources. In other words, the CNDD-FDD is today a “State-Party” in all its characteristics and forms.

The elections were reportedly not free and fair, but characterised by a lack of independence on the part of the electoral commission, repression of the opposition, lack of press freedom, politically tainted electoral legislation and massive electoral fraud, according to participants at the symposium. The absence of a democratic political culture was seen as a massive obstacle to further democratisation in Burundi. According to the researchers present, Burundi's political class, both majority and opposition, suffers from a lack of democratic political socialisation. Guided by the authoritarian culture inherited from the maquis, the leaders of the CNDD-FDD, in power since 2005, seem to have been unable to understand the rationale for the existence of the opposition and are doing everything they can to abuse, persecute or suppress it. For their part, the leaders of the opposition do not master their role and lose themselves in sterile internal quarrels that do not allow them to offer to the Burundian people alternative solutions to the various problems that haunt them.

The international community's attempt to exert a positive influence on Ndayishimiye's government by easing the international sanctions imposed in 2015 therefore seems to have largely failed.

The symposium also drew attention to issues of political representation. The August 2000 Treaty of Arusha and the subsequent 2005 Constitution contained an ethnic quota system that has been maintained in a modified form in the 2018 Constitution. The symposium addressed the issues of political representation of the Twa and other groups not recognised in the quota system, the social inclusion of people who do not clearly identify with a group, and the question of the meaning of identities in general - how to define 'ethnic' identity, whether the categories 'Hutu' and 'Tutsi' are still relevant in today's Burundi and, if so, why and for whom.



Panel 4 : Peace, conflict and refugees - Burundi and its neighbours

Over the last few decades, Burundi has experienced numerous violent conflicts that have had and continue to have cross-border repercussions. The country has both imported and exported patterns of escalation and displaced persons, and the same applies to peace-building operations. An important assumption, therefore, is that we will not understand Burundi's path to relative peace, or the ups and downs of internal freedom, unless we compare them with other experiences in the region and relate them to the proximate actors. Clearly, the Burundian actors have come to terms with a peace-building formula that presents itself as an extreme case of consociational power-sharing, the opposite of what was applied in Rwanda.

In panel 4, the discussions focused on current levels and dynamics of violence in Burundi, risk and resilience factors, the causes of violent conflict and the impact of the presence of refugees in the region. Although the power-sharing characteristics of the political system has led to a sharp reduction in the politicisation of ethnic identities, no more massacres along ethnic dividing lines have taken place and a resumption of civil war has been avoided, the symposium participants agreed that lasting peace in Burundi may be jeopardised by a number of political, economic, social and security factors. The country continues to suffer violence, including violent clashes in border regions. The presence of groups of armed men combined with porous borders remains a threat to peace and security. Furthermore, Burundi scores very poorly in the rankings of studies based on broader concepts of peace (i.e. cases that are characterised by the absence of large-scale physical violence (negative peace), but that experience the persistence of structural violence).



Studies presented at the symposium also showed the extent to which Burundians have already experienced violence - often with an identity component - and highlighted the high level of individual and intergenerational trauma prevalent in the population. The challenges of trauma inherited from the distant or recent past still pose major problems that requires appropriate, multi-faceted responses. Also, the existence of an institutional infrastructure working on the process of restoring truth (Commission Vérité et Réconciliation, CVR) reveals that there is still a large reservoir of passions and emotions, of groups and individuals weakened by past trauma whose narratives about the truth tend to be mutually exclusive, claiming special attention to the suffering that affected members of their ethnic group. These fragilities highlight the relevance of integrating the psychological field to support existing efforts but also to ensure that they are inclusive and participatory. Sustainable peace requires attention to these psychosocial aspects, even when all the structural and formal peacebuilding blocks are in place.

The discussions did highlight the many resilience factors that can be observed in local communities in Burundi, such as existing skills, networks and informal conflict management structures at local level. However, their impact is limited if structural risk factors persist.

Lastly, the regional dimension of violent conflicts was highlighted, with particular reference to the historical and continuing influence of colonial domination, the political interdependencies between the countries in the region, the ongoing - and often reciprocal - movements of exiles, the influence of these refugees on the dynamics of conflict in the region, and the transnational narratives of victims and perpetrators which have influenced the course of the conflicts. By way of example, since the 2015 electoral crisis in Burundi and the ensuing population movement, with waves of Burundians fleeing to Rwanda, tensions have risen between the two countries with accusations on both sides of supporting groups hostile to each other's governments.

Panel 5 : Burundi, Germany and East African Community relations



The aim of the symposium was also to gain a better understanding of regional integration and its economic dimension. As a landlocked state, Burundi is dependent on its East African neighbours, through which almost all of the country's imports and exports pass, with 80% of Burundi's exports passing through the port of Dar es Salaam. Regional integration within the East African Community - of which Burundi has been a member since 2007 - is another area of concern. The East African Community (EAC) is in the process of reorganising and will possibly focus even more strongly on the Indian Ocean as a trading area; such developments have a direct impact on the country.

The symposium adopted different points of view on the East African Community. These include the "external perspective", which highlights the interests and influence of external actors. The European Union (EU), as a central player, has adopted different approaches towards processes of regional integration over the decades and is now faced with the challenge of how it wants to and can act as a partner to the EAC in a more multipolar environment. The role of China in particular, but also that of India and the Arab countries, raise new questions. What role can (or should) Western political conditionality still play? Will the EU continue to intensify and further develop initiatives such as the Global Gateway, or will it withdraw in the medium term from supporting regional communities such as the EAC?

But the "inside look" at the EAC also provides some interesting insights. Discussions focused on whether regional integration is enabling people-centred participation and development, how the EAC enlargement to include new member states is influencing the depth and the quality of integration, the challenges posed by the many governance problems in EAC member states, and the political and diplomatic tensions that exist between some EAC members. For Burundi, however, integration into the EAC remains a priority, given its own economic difficulties. At the same time, the concrete benefits are rather limited. Even during the political crisis of 2015, the role played by the EAC was not very significant.



Conclusion and outlook

The multi-perspective overview of Burundi in its relations with its neighbours was certainly beneficial for all the participants: if we consider East Africa today, in particular the East African Community and historically the joint path within the German East African protectorate, it is possible to recognise several overlaps, but also particular developments. The disciplinary diversity and varied origins of the panel participants also created a richer picture than is usually seen at academic events.

For the Baden-Württemberg decision-makers present, it is also important to take a spatial and temporal perspective in order to develop evaluation criteria for the current partnership with Burundi. Questions that will remain important in the context of the partnership include the scope for cooperation between civil society and universities with partners in a country with an authoritarian regime, the role that a partnership can play in the face of persistent authoritarianism in Burundi, the responsibility for and dealing with the colonial past and its persisting effects today, and the prospects and framework conditions for reciprocal cooperation between two partners with very different economic conditions.

Studies on the history and legacy of the colonial era, exhibitions and cultural events, exchange programmes for cultural and academic players and joint memory work carried out by researchers and/or civil society initiatives would for example strengthen collaboration and reciprocal exchanges. They would also provide fruitful input into the debate, still at an embryonic stage, on the restitution of human remains and cultural belongings from Burundi.

The symposium also showed that research and open academic exchange are of great benefit if one seeks to deepen the understanding between the partners and of the internal dynamics of this partnership. This is necessary in order to break down old patterns and arrive at true reciprocity and “togetherness” based on respect, equality and honest exchange.

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With financial support from the State Parliament and the State Ministry of Baden-Württemberg via the Baden-Württemberg Development Cooperation Foundation.



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Links to the websites:

Africa Centre for Transregional Research: <https://www.act.uni-freiburg.de>

Arnold-Bergstraesser-Institut: <https://www.arnold-bergstraesser.de>

Hochschulnetzwerk für Globale Partnerschaft: <https://www.hochschulnetzwerk-glopart.de>