

*The historic conflict between Hutu and Tutsi is over
Burundi, difficult dawn on the hills*

It is the twin country of Rwanda, but here there was no genocide: the Hutu majority was excluded from power, run by Tutsi soldiers. A long civil war ended thanks to the mediation of Mandela. Now that peace has returned, the young Burundian democracy tries to heal the wounds of a tragic past

Bujumbura, more than a capital seems a vacation spot. Situated on Lake Tanganyika, surrounded by green hills, no big buildings, no traffic, nor a lot of people on the street. It has a so natural gentleness as its bloody story is incredible. Going from Congo to Burundi is like entering another world, much more relaxed and gentle. Here everything seems much easier: you can change euros into Burundian francs, while in Congo even changing dollars is difficult (many people look at the series or the issuing year, because a lot of counterfeit bills was introduced). You do not feel the tension that you constantly breathe in Congo (even if in Kinshasa much more than East, and it is a paradox, because it is East that suffered most atrocious violence). Walking around the capital of Burundi, watching students playing volleyball, looking at the families getting out of Sunday mass (the vast majority of Burundians are Roman Catholics) would bode well. In fact, Africa, in Burundi, seems to have won one of the most difficult challenges, after a long transition phase, finally successful (Nelson Mandela, who seemed to fail in mediation between the warring parties, can be proud of the result).

Hutu against Tutsi, Tutsi against Hutu. The two populations are perhaps the most known African ethnic groups in Europe, for tragic reasons. A long trail of blood that accompanies the history of Rwanda and Burundi, a hatred that sometimes seemed invincible, coming to involve even many religious leaders in killings and violence, and even an African Holocaust, the Rwandan one in 1994. Can one rise again from hell? The answer coming from Burundi is positive, but the path of the small African country can join only in part the one of the "twin" Rwanda. It was the colonization, at first German and then Belgian, to unite the two small but indomitable kingdoms in a single state, Rwanda-Urundi. But in Burundi, the penetration and control of the Europeans were much more difficult than in Rwanda. The hierarchical structure of the two countries was similar: a Tutsi king, this ethnic group was made by warriors and cattle farmers; a mixed but mainly Tutsi aristocracy, with the presence of Hutu exponent, also thanks to the many mixed marriages; a basic sedentary farmers and tributaries of the sovereign, a large majority Hutu. The difference therefore was more social than ethnic because the two groups have always spoken the same language (Kinyarwanda and Kirundi) and shared the same religion (Catholic). The alleged physical difference, which wants Tutsi high stature and with more similar to Europeans features than Hutu, lower and with a Bantu aspect, is not found in reality: no one has ever been able to identify for certain, at first sight, a Hutu from a Tutsi. The racist anthropology in vogue in the early decades of the twentieth century in Europe (see "Galatea", May 2005) emphasized to delirium the alleged genetic differences between the two peoples. German pseudo-scientists opened the gate, and the Belgian administrators completed the masterpiece, entering the race in the population registers and identity documents, documents that will be a lethal instrument at the time of the genocide in Rwanda. The ethnic group becomes a destiny, even more than it was before the "civilization": the Tutsi, which are considered genetically more intelligent and ambitious, can join the army and get in the colonial administration, the Hutus are laborers for farm work.

The proportions between the two populations are similar in the two countries: more than eighty percent Hutu, the Tutsi are less than twenty per cent. But the Hutu frustration is much stronger in Rwanda, where it finds an unexpected outlet channel in the structures of the Catholic Church. Seminaries are basically the only chance of Hutu social advancement, and it is a seminary that forms the leader of the "Hutu Revolution" in Rwanda, Grégoire Kayibanda. The rise of Kayibanda is similar to the one of many other African politicians in the fifties: popular origins, progressive

ideas, charisma, strong ambition and ability to drag the masses. In Burundi, instead, the independence movement started from the top, direct emanation of the royal family: it is the young Prince Louis Rwagasore, who studied in Belgium, to found the party UPRONA ("Union pour le Progrès National") and to claim independence from Brussels. Although it may seem strange, Belgium supports the "proletarian" Hutu leader Kayibanda in Rwanda and oppose the aristocratic Tutsi Rwagasore in Burundi. We are in the late fifties, and the path of the twin countries is divided. In Rwanda, the former seminarian Kayibanda movement soon takes a violent turn against the Tutsi: depriving them of their privileged position by every means seems more important than independence. It is no coincidence if Rwanda will remain in western orbit: Belgium and France will have a prominent role at any time. In Burundi, instead, the fight is first political than ethnic: the party founded by Prince Rwagasore wanted to be the party of all Burundians, even if the domain always remained Tutsi. In fact, to contend the supremacy of the nationalist UPRONA is not a Hutu political movement, but the Christian Democratic Party, a loyal ally of Belgium. Prince Rwagasore incites the population to civil disobedience, asking Burundian not to pay taxes to the colonial administration and to boycott every Belgian store. In response, the Belgians put him under house arrest. No wonder that 1961 elections for the parliament, which is still under the colonial authority (officially "trusteeship" delegated to Belgium by the UN), the UPRONA gets eighty percent of the vote (which means it is voted by both Tutsi and Hutu), and Prince Rwagasore is appointed head of government with a mandate to prepare the country for the imminent independence.

But the design of the new Burundi lasts only two weeks (like Lumumba in Congo): October 13, 1961 the prince is murdered while he is eating dinner at the Tanganyika Hotel. He was not thirty years old. The killer is a Greek called Kageorgis, paid, it is said, by the rival Christian Democratic Party, friend of Brussels. It is just the beginning of a spiral of violence that will continue for more than forty years, up to degenerate into a real civil war along ethnic lines. If at first it was just a power struggle, then each wave of killings produces an equal and opposite reaction, more powerful and more extended to the population .. There are not good and bad ones, in this kind of stories. However, very schematically, we can say that the Hutu in Rwanda played mostly the role of executioners, the victims in Burundi. The fact is that in Burundi the Hutu try to overthrow the monarchy in 1965, but they are unsuccessful. The Tutsi-dominated army repression is fierce, and leads directly to the coup in 1966: anyone no longer needs the king now, Burundi became a republic led by the iron hand of General Michel Micombero, who is at the same time President, Prime Minister and General Secretary of UPRONA, become a single party. Since that moment, the history of Burundi can be summarized easily: every time Hutu try to lift their heads, the army triggers off the general indiscriminate slaughter. A military dictator replaced another, not only Tutsi, but always from the same region of the south, almost from the same clan, at a rate of, more or less, a coup in ten years. So, Micombero was deposed by Colonel Jean Baptiste Bagaza in 1976, and Bagaza was chased away by Major Pierre Buyoya in 1987. Even the number of victims was repetitive, at the time of the principal massacres: 150 thousand Hutu were exterminated in the "pogroms" in 1972, and a similar number in the massacre in the 1988 summer, with Tanganyika Lake that every time was filled by floating corpses. The massacre of 1988, however, passed less unnoticed than usual, because somehow the world became increasingly a "global village". Buyoya took a few steps, at least officially: he set up a commission of inquiry that had to investigate the charge of extermination, and began to talk about national reconciliation and democracy. Hutu, in the meantime, were politically organized in the Burundi Democratic Front (FRODEBU), and when finally the first free elections arrived, they were not caught unprepared. It was 1993, in some ways a breakthrough year (or if you want, the official start of the civil war).

The elections of 1993 not only mark the victory of Hutu majority over Tutsi minority, as expected. They are also the victory of a civilian (Melchior Ndadaye, who became the first Hutu president of the country) against a soldier (Buyoya), and of the opposition represented by FRODEBU against

the party of the establishment (UPRONA): the percentages of consensus showed that Burundian people thought in not only ethnic terms. You will clearly see in the next years. But once again, the choice of the polls is suppressed by brute force: just a few months after the new government installation, in which there are both ethnic groups, a group of skydivers tries a coup. President Ndadaye is arrested and killed, like many other Hutu leaders. The coup fails, but the Burundi plunges into chaos, with a vacant presidency, a parliament paralyzed because of surreal disputes, a government that does not matter anything. In the country an armed confrontation is rife, it assumes the character of the civil war because many Hutu no longer believe the political struggle and organize themselves to fight back point for point militarily. One of them is the future president François Nkurunziza, who leaves his university chair to reach the guerrillas. Behind the scenes, Buyoya just waits for the right moment to enforce the new law of the jungle. In 1996, he puts an end to the farce of the official democracy with another coup, inaugurating his second personal regime that will last seven years, until 2003. There are seven years that see the whole Great Lakes region in grip of war. In parallel, the diplomacy works to try to find a lasting peace. Nelson Mandela personally commit himself to Burundi, he takes the place of another old African leader, President of Tanzania Julius Nyerere. After years of negotiations, they get the Arusha accords of August 2001. But the internal conflict does not cease, also because Pierre Buyoya is not going to relinquish power; likewise, the forces of the Front for the Defence of Democracy (FDD) do not accept demobilization. Burundi seems a hopeless case, in conditions even worse than Rwanda that also experienced the monstrosity of the genocide of the Tutsi (and Hutu who opposed) in 1994. But reality is quite different. In Rwanda, the peace is imposed by sheer military force. Paul Kagame is the strong man who controls all the power. He gets the almost unconditional support of the United States and uses the occupation of the mining regions of Congo to arm its army and enrich his regime and country. The game works in a big way, so today Rwanda is presented as a fully restored country, with a great economic growth, accounts in good standing, and reconciliation between Hutu and Tutsi (in essence, it is what the correspondent of "Repubblica" Sergio Ramazzotti wrote recently). The abandonment of ties with France in favor of USA is also noticed by the fact that Rwanda is becoming an Anglophone country. Burundi, by comparison, looks forlorn, still unstable, unable to modernize, to go beyond the production of coffee, the only export commodity. But politically its path was clear and democratic, moreover, without suffering the level of moral degradation into which Rwanda plunged (not only for the one million slaughtered people, but above all for 600 thousand executioners, and the estimate is rounded down, without mentioning the countless cases of complicity). Burundians came up for air by their own, through the ballot box, without any sponsor. With great effort, they get to a transitional government (2003): Buyoya finally steps aside, the interim president is Domitien Ndayizeye, Hutu leader of FRODEBU. It is a case to frame a new constitution, to submit it to a referendum, and then to call new elections with the participation of the former guerrilla movement of the Forces of Defence of Democracy (FDD) turned into a political movement. Things move forward more slowly than expected, just like in neighboring Congo. The fact is that many politicians, including President Ndayizeye, are used to live in constant mediation, which lasts for years, without submitting themselves to a real popular opinion. There is also a strange consultation in the historical parties of Hutu and Tutsi, the FRODEBU and UPRONA, that the more time passes the less they are representative. After several postponements, the long-awaited moment arrives. On February 28, 2005 the new constitution is approved, with an amazing turnout: 92 percent of the population. In the summer of that year, the elections cause an earthquake: the two historical parties are almost canceled, the representatives of the FDD in coalition with other opponents in what is now an inter-ethnic party come en masse in parliament. On August 26, almost unanimously, the parliament elects a new president, Pierre Nkurunziza. A fervent Protestant Christian, born in 1965, Nkurunziza, as we have seen, is a former professor at Bujumbura University, who joined the guerrillas after they luckily escaped the showdown in the days of the coup of 1993. For much of the population he is the

change, the leader of a new political generation that seeks a better future for Burundi. The innovation is represented by women, who enter the new government in important positions: Foreign Ministry, the justice one, the vice presidency. The first concrete step of Nkurunziza government was free primary education to everyone. A great turning point, made with such difficulty and with the help of humanitarian and religious organizations, including "Amade", the charity founded by Grace of Monaco, now chaired by Caroline, who recently visited the country (the best way to celebrate her 50 years). The other important step was the integration of former guerrillas into the now really inter-ethnic army, and the agreement signed with the last armed group in action, a few months ago. Now peace seems really total, even if the balances are still very fragile. And there are also heavy shadows on the new course. The human rights organizations complain about an authoritarian trend of the new president. The most sensational case involved the arrest of former President Ndayizeye, accused of plotting against the new government. Same fate happened to several journalists, just to be critical or denounce cases of corruption, which is still widespread in Burundian politics. Evidently Nkurunziza (whose name means "good news") carries the imprint of the former guerrilla longer than that of the professor. Or maybe there is still too much tension for sufficiently liberal attitudes. In Africa, it takes very little to transform oneself from president to dictator. But it is more difficult when people have already come a democratic path that tends to become irreversible. Of course, the Constitution of Burundi tried to solve the ethnic problem in an unusual way, by institutionalizing the representatives of the Hutu and Tutsi to 60 and 40 percent, instead of trying to erase the difference. Hard to say, however, if the solution of Rwanda is better: every distinction between Hutu and Tutsi is abolished, which is good, but in fact the power is in the hands of Tutsi of Paul Kagame, who is elected in a sham election and who is ready to neutralize any potential political opponents on charges of "incitement to racial hatred". Also different are the ways the two countries revise the past. In Burundi, they move towards the establishment of a "Truth and Reconciliation" commission on South African model, to bring to light all the responsibilities for acts of violence since independence. In Rwanda, finally, two paths are overlapped: the international one, the UN Special Tribunal in Arusha, which already passed many convictions for the 1994 genocide, and the internal one, the government delegate to the traditional Rwandan courts villages, the so-called "gacaca," a justice it could no longer handle, given the huge number of people involved. The traditional approach to "truth and reconciliation" seems to work: most of two million Rwandan refugees came back home. A small part (about 30 thousand) still live in Burundi, while Burundi as well wait for the return of hundreds of thousands of refugees from Tanzania. The country, already very poor, was hit last year by a severe drought which made real the specter of hunger for people who normally did not have this kind of problem. The small African nation must also fight against the scourge of AIDS, which affects one in five adults, at least in urban areas. In short, the path of new Burundi is winding. But it would be unfair not to consider the great effort made by Burundi in recent years, with political results, defined as "miraculous" by international experts. Africa once again proves that one can come back from hell. And there is no crime that can not be forgiven.

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