Unfinished Histories

Fraiture, Pierre-Philippe

Published by Leuven University Press

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Unfinished Histories: Empire and Postcolonial Resonance in Central Africa and Belgium.

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On 20 May 2020, Burundians went to the polls to elect a new president. This was the first election since the 2015 political crisis, when President Pierre Nkurunziza announced that he would violate the Arusha Accord by running for a third term. Following his 2015 re-election, Nkurunziza and his wing of the ruling party, the National Council for the Defense of Democracy – Forces for the Defense of Democracy (CNDD-FDD) proceeded to consolidate power, securing ‘almost complete control over state and society’.¹

Although Nkurunziza announced that he would not run in 2020, many of the underlying issues of the 2015 conflict persisted. As predicted, the 2020 elections were marred by irregularities including reports that members of the opposition party, the National Congress for Liberty (CNL), led by Agathon Rwasa, were threatened, beaten, arrested, and even killed by the police and Imbonerakure.² International observers were prevented from entering the country while internal journalists faced intimidation.³ Despite the irregularities, however, the violence never reached the scale of the 2015 crisis, and the CNDD-FDD candidate, Évariste Ndayishimiye, won with 68.72 per cent of the popular vote. The elections also took place during the Covid-19 pandemic, which was downplayed by the CNDD-FDD. Less than three weeks after the poll, however, President Pierre Nkurunziza died unexpectedly from complications linked to Covid-19, although his illness was denied by the authorities, who claimed he died from a heart attack.

This chapter investigates domestic and Belgian media narratives of events surrounding the 2020 election. It explores opposing sides of the country’s media conflict through an analysis of coverage by the state-run Radio Télévision Nationale du Burundi [Burundi National Radio and Television] (RTNB) and the independent online news outlet SOS Médias Burundi and compares this to coverage found in La Libre Belgique and Le Soir, outlets from Belgium, the former colonial power. International media often downplay the legacy of historical colonialism in favour of essentialist stereotypes when representing conflict in
Central Africa, and the Belgian press is no exception. Drawing on theories of framing and narrative, the chapter will scrutinise the varying constructions of the 2020 elections for different sets of Burundian and Belgian audiences.

**Belgium’s Historical Role in Burundi**

While much has changed in Burundi since independence, the legacy of Belgian colonialism cannot be understated, particularly its role in racialising social identities. In precolonial times, the economic system was based on a form of clientelism (*ubugabire*) between Tutsi patrons and Hutu clients, and it is generally agreed that this system provided the basis for later ethnic classification although the politics surrounding the terms Hutu and Tutsi, and the nature of precolonial social and political relationships, is highly contested. Colonial domination, first by Germany (1897–1916) and then by Belgium (1916–62), brought about significant changes in Burundian society, particularly in relation to the construction of Tutsi and Hutu identities.

Like the Germans before them, the Belgians entered Burundi with entrenched ideological preconceptions of racial and class superiority which they used to interpret the sophisticated hierarchical political and economic structures of the society. They believed that the Tutsi were evolutionarily closer to Europeans and thus superior to the Hutu. This belief, based on the now discredited Hamitic hypothesis, stemmed from the idea that Tutsi were descendants of Noah’s son Ham who had migrated to Africa from the Middle East. According to the myth, Tutsi eventually arrived in Rwanda from Somalia or Ethiopia and conquered the Hutu and Twa as a result of their natural superiority. Tutsi, Hutu, and Twa were considered to be of completely different racial groups, and the Belgians subsequently translated these beliefs into racist policies. For example, the colonial education system was designed to educate a Tutsi elite while Hutu were completely evicted from positions of power.

The education system was run by the Catholic Church, which played an important role in promulgating the Hamitic hypothesis (see Chantal Gishoma’s chapter in this volume). Not only did the hypothesis determine education policy, but it also dominated the Church’s evangelisation strategy. Cardinal Charles Lavigerie, who established the Society of African Missions, believed that the conversion of non-Christian peoples would be most successful if evangelistic efforts focused on political leaders and so set about converting the ruling (Tutsi) class in the expectation that the (predominantly Hutu) masses would follow suit. Such a policy solidified the ethnic hierarchy and also forged a direct relationship between church and state.
In summary, Tutsi were reinvented by the colonial state and Catholic Church as a non-native group that was elevated above Hutu but was ‘still lower down the racial hierarchy from the master [European]’.

According to Alexandre Raffoule, colonial rule effectively ethnicised the state and all of its institutions. Indeed, Patricia Daley argues that ‘Belgian colonialism laid the conditions for the traditions of genocide’ in Burundi (and, moreover, in the broader Great Lakes region).

The Legacy of Colonial Racialisation

Burundi gained independence in 1962 when the Belgians handed over power to Tutsi-dominated politico-military institutions. Within the first decade following independence, ethnic-based conflict was planned and executed by the state security institutions, claiming the lives of around two hundred thousand Hutu. Indeed, ethnic violence would continue for the next four decades, as the Tutsi-led Union for National Progress (UPRONA) dominated the political landscape and retaliated with heavy force to localised Hutu uprisings in 1965, 1969, 1972, and 1988. This force reached a genocidal scale in 1972, which left around three hundred thousand dead.

The Tutsi-dominated military dictatorship lasted until 1993 when, in the country’s first democratic elections, the Hutu Melchior Ndadaye of the Hutu-dominated Front for Democracy in Burundi (FRODEBU) was elected. Just a few months later, however, Ndadaye was assassinated by Tutsi military officers who opposed the political power shift, triggering a twelve-year civil war between a Tutsi-dominated government under Pierre Buyoya and several Hutu militias. The conflict claimed the lives of about three hundred thousand people.

Signed in August 2000, the Arusha Peace Agreement paved the way for democratic elections in 2005, ensuring ethnic quotas in the two chambers of legislature that enabled the de-ethnicisation of politics. The extent to which such de-ethnicisation has been achieved for the long term is, however, hotly debated.

Raffoule considers that Arusha successfully reduced ethnicist discourse in Burundian politics in the period 2000–15. He notes that many Tutsi political candidates joined the CNDD-FDD to increase their chances of being elected, and there was a decrease in ethnic voting, particularly among Tutsi voters. Raffoule also argues ‘ethnicity was not widely re-politicised’ during the 2015 crisis.

Nevertheless, the term ‘genocide’ started to circulate among national and international NGOs to refer to the increased state violence since 2015. In an analysis of these warnings, Andrea Purdeková argues that the ‘ethnic genocide frame obfuscates the nature of the conflict in Burundi’. According to her, the
‘genocide reticence-turned-logorrhoea witnessed in this crisis is directly tied to the perceived close resemblance of Burundi and Rwanda and hence the pressure not to repeat the mistakes of the past.\textsuperscript{25} In her view, the overuse of the ‘genocide’ label to refer to Burundi ‘has increased regime isolationism and emboldened the regime’.\textsuperscript{26} More broadly, she observes that this framing of the political crisis ‘maintains African conflict in the representational straightjacket of ethnic conflict’.\textsuperscript{27} Similar observations have been made about media narratives surrounding the 2015 events, with news outlets, including Belgian ones, discussing the risk of events ‘taking an “ethnic turn” and/or becoming genocidal’ and adopting expressions such as ‘ethnic enmities’ or ‘ethnic hatred’, and, in some cases, comparing the crisis with events in Rwanda in 1994.\textsuperscript{28}

While the alarm of genocide, ethnic enmities, and comparisons with Rwanda in 1994 may have been overblown and oversimplified, a number of observers have noted a re-ethnicisation of politics in Burundi since 2015. Daley and Rowan Popplewell argue, for instance, that ‘recent violence appears to be political in nature, [however] we cannot dismiss ethnicity entirely from the analysis. There are growing fears in Burundi that ethnicity will emerge as a major fault line as the political crisis progresses’.\textsuperscript{29} These authors note that ‘parts of the former Tutsi elite, while accepting the ethnic split in government, are increasingly alarmed by their marginalisation from power by the current regime, especially since, for historical reasons, they constitute the bulk of the educated people in Burundi’.\textsuperscript{30} Furthermore, analysts of Burundi’s media and civil society have noted an increasing ethnicism in politics.\textsuperscript{31} Stef Vandeginste argues, for example, that the introduction of non-consensual ethnic quotas in the international NGO sector ‘puts ethnicity back at the heart of political contestation’ and that this ‘contributes to a re-ethnicisation of society’.\textsuperscript{32}

**Belgium’s (Non)Recognition of Colonial History**

It is clear that the construction of ethnicity under Belgian colonialism has marked Burundian politics and continues to play a fundamental if contested role. Meanwhile, Belgium seems to have difficulty acknowledging its colonial past.\textsuperscript{33} Castryck considers the problem to be threefold:

1. the silent majority is basically not interested – and never was – in Congolese or colonial affairs,
2. African studies in Belgium are extremely minimal and the academic attitude in general attaches little importance to informing broader society, and
3. the political situation causes a preference for keeping history unknown.\textsuperscript{34}
On the other hand, the death of George Floyd on 25 May 2020 and subsequent global Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests gained significant media attention in Belgium, raising questions about the country’s colonial past and its relationship with contemporary forms of racism. The movement resulted in the removal of statues of King Leopold II in Brussels, Antwerp, Leuven, and Ghent, and on 30 June 2020, Belgian King Philippe I addressed a letter to President Tshisekedi of the DRC in which he expressed regret for ‘acts of violence and cruelty’ committed under the Congo Free State (see Yvette Hutchison’s chapter in this volume). There has yet to be any formal recognition of Belgian’s role in Burundi, however, and despite the proliferation of discussions about racism and Belgian’s colonial past since Floyd’s death, Burundi remains peripheral if it is mentioned at all. As the analysis presented in this chapter suggests, many of the issues regarding Belgian’s relationship to the past persist.

All the outlets analysed in this chapter present Nkurunziza and his successor Évariste Ndayishimye as religiously inspired leaders who trivialise the pandemic and conceal Nkurunziza’s death as the result of Covid-19. This narrative is presented as legitimate in the state-run RTNB but is highly criticised in SOS, La Libre, and Le Soir, which also note the increasing authoritarian nature of the government and highlight the electoral irregularities. The principal difference between the coverage in SOS and that found in the Belgian outlets is that SOS reports the use of the reformulated Hamitic hypothesis to discredit the main opposition candidate, Rwasa, as a Tutsi accomplice, despite him being a Hutu who had previously participated in anti-Tutsi massacres. In the final discussion, this chapter argues that this ethnicist discourse reveals a sophisticated political manoeuvre, highlighting the socially constructed, rather than essential, nature of ethnicity in Burundi. Surprisingly, references to ethnicity are mostly absent in the Belgian media depictions of events. The ‘ancient hatreds’ stereotype, which was used in media accounts of 2015, fails to capture the construction of Rwasa as a Tutsi collaborator. In their depictions of the 2020 elections, the Belgian outlets therefore opt for silence on issues of ethnicity and turn instead to alternative clichés such as irrational dictators and desperate poverty. It is argued that if they were to recognise this political use of ethnicity, the Belgian outlets would need to confront the historical nature of these constructions and, consequently, Belgium’s role in current Burundian affairs. The choice to focus on dictators and poverty, on the contrary, exonerates Belgium’s role in ongoing conflicts and suggests the need for Belgian support. This discussion highlights the need for further decolonisation of the Belgian media.
Methodology

*Le Soir* and *La Libre* are Belgium’s most popular francophone newspapers. *La Libre* is generally considered more conservative than *Le Soir*, a liberal and progressive news outlet. *RTNB* is Burundi’s national broadcaster that, according to Jean-Benoît Falisse and Hugues Nkengurutse, ‘gives a preponderant place to spokespersons of the regime’. *SOS Médias* is an online newspaper that was established following the big shutdown of independent media in Burundi in 2015. While many journalists fled in exile, some remained in the country and continued to operate. A few who had worked at Radio Bonesha, a former private, multi-ethnic radio station known for its reconciliation-oriented programmes, established *SOS Médias Burundi* by disseminating information online through social networks.

The majority (thirteen) of articles published in *Le Soir* analysed here are attributed to Colette Braeckman, Central African specialist and the outlet’s editor for Central Africa. Without doubt, Braeckman has elsewhere contributed to discussions of Belgium’s historical role in the region through her many publications on the subject. On the other hand, scholarly analyses of *Le Soir*’s past coverage of the region show that the outlet adopts stereotypical representations as do some of Braeckman’s independent publications. The remaining *Soir* articles are attributed to Agence France Presse (AFP), Belga, the Belgian press agency, and other in-house journalists. *La Libre* attributes thirteen articles to Marie-France Cros, Central African specialist and the outlet’s Africa editor. The remaining articles are attributed to AFP, Belga, and other in-house journalists. Stories in the Burundian *RTNB* and *SOS Médias* are exclusively authored by in-house journalists. The outlets were selected because they offer insights into the differing ways in which the story of these events was constructed for different sets of Burundian and Belgian audiences. All articles were retrieved using keyword searches via the outlets’ online search facility. The total number of articles analysed for each outlet can be found in Table 1.

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<th><em>Le Soir</em></th>
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<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>23</td>
<td>28</td>
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Table 1: The number of articles analysed for each news source

The analysis that follows draws on the concept of framing found in narrative analysis. According to Robert Entman, framing selects ‘some aspects of a perceived reality and make(s) them more salient […] in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and or
treatment recommendation. Mona Baker argues that the concept of framing can best be understood through narrativity, describing narratives as ‘stories that are temporally and causally constituted in such a way as to allow us to make moral decisions and act in the real world’. The analysis investigates the framing of the 2020 election by applying Margaret Somers and Gloria Gibson’s narrative concepts of causal emplotment and selective appropriation, which are particularly useful for identifying frames in social texts. According to them, emplotment ‘translates events into episodes. As a mode of explanation, causal emplotment is an accounting (however fantastic or implicit) of why a narrative has the story line it does’. As Baker explains, causal emplotment can override chronological or categorical order to ‘turn a set of propositions into an intelligible sequence about which we can form an opinion, and thus charges the events depicted with moral and ethical significance’. Causal emplotment also enables us to make evaluative judgements, demanding and enabling the selective appropriation of constituent elements. It would be impossible to include every detail of experience into a narrative. Selective appropriation refers to the selection of ‘events or elements from the vast array of open-ended and overlapping events that constitute experience.’

The analysis is divided into three sections, each examining the narration of the central elements of the story: 1) Nkurunziza’s government prior to the election, 2) the government’s handling of the pandemic and Nkurunziza’s death, and 3) the post-Nkurunziza government. The final discussion considers the outlets’ use of hermeneutic composability, a narrative feature identified by Jerome Bruner that describes how elements of a story are reconstituted to form a new whole for readers in different cultural contexts.

Analysis

Nkurunziza’s Government Prior to the Election

In RTNB, Nkurunziza is primarily framed as a legitimate, peaceful, and democratic president and also as the country’s spiritual leader, reinforcing the colonial legacy of a close relationship between church and state. In one article, for example, RTNB focuses on a speech made by the president to the Église de Rocher in Buye, the evangelical church at which his wife, Denise Bucumi-Nkurunziza, is an ordained minister. The outlet describes the president as assuring the crowds that ‘[…] since 1962, no leader completed his term without there being internal conflicts’. The establishment of peace and democracy is, according to Nkurunziza, thanks to Burundians’ having ‘reserved the first place for
God’. The outlet thus frames Nkurunziza as a clerical, even sacred, figure who is able to instil faith in the people, which in turn results in peace and democracy.

For all the outlet’s emphasis on democracy, however, coverage of the elections is limited to a few procedural issues, with almost no discussion of the opposition candidate, Rwasa, or the alleged electoral irregularities. The only mention of the 2015 election in the outlet is in an article covering Nkurunziza’s speech on Labour Day in which he ‘welcomed the contribution made by the population to the elections from 2015 until 2020. “May this good practice continue in Burundi in order to cut off foreign aid”, the Head of State noted.’

This statement reflects the trend of isolation seen in Burundi since 2015, notably the cutting of international aid. Since independence, Burundi has been heavily dependent on aid money, particularly from Belgium, other Western countries, and the European Union. Belgium was the first international donor to withdraw aid following the 2015 crisis, but it was soon followed by the Netherlands, the United States, and the European Union, which consequently pushed the country into an economic crisis. This statement in RTNB, however, suggests that the move away from foreign aid is Burundi’s intention rather than a decision imposed from outside.

SOS Médias reports the same Labour Day speech in its coverage, albeit with a different emphasis. According to this outlet, Nkurunziza largely drew up a positive assessment of his 15 years in power. He took the opportunity to explain that the first 10 years of his rule were ‘painful because of political parties and civil society organizations that served the interests of the colonisers’.

Like RTNB, SOS shows Nkurunziza’s positive appraisal of his own presidency here, but the outlet also includes his suggestion that members of the opposition, civil society, and between the lines, those who opposed his third term, held him back until he was finally free following the 2015 elections. Moreover, he overtly accuses these actors of working in the interests of the ‘colonisers’. This insinuates the decision of former colonial powers such as Belgium to cut aid following the events of 2015; however, unlike RTNB, here it seems that Nkurunziza is expressing disapproval of the decision and blaming the opposition for causing it. This may be because, rather than simply cutting aid, Belgium and other former donors decided to redirect money towards international NGOs, UN agencies, and national development agencies, many of whom work with local NGOs.

Like RTNB, SOS highlights the government’s use of religious discourse, however, such discourse is presented by the outlet as the government’s attempt
to consolidate power rather than provide spiritual leadership. For example, in an article about a party meeting, a party activist recites the following prayer:

Oh Lord! Walk alongside Évariste. Direct our Rock, his steps [...] make him sit in the palace of Ntare (the presidential palace), give us Burundians the spirit to respect him as we respect our eternal Pierre Nkurunziza. [...] Our Rock, we ask this of you. Make sure that the enemies of Burundi who are currently in lockdown remain so. And until the end of our elections. May Kagame watch us without reaching us, may the United States observe us with their weapons without reaching us, may European Union meetings about Burundi be doomed.54

While the outlet highlights in the same way as RTNB how Nkurunziza is presented by his party as a spiritual leader, the more extremist elements of his speech (referring to Rwanda, the United States, and the European Union as state enemies) do not appear in the RTNB. SOS notes in the same article how ‘since 2015, the CNDD-FDD has banned Rwandan gospel music during its large gatherings’. Burundian and Rwandan relations deteriorated significantly following the events of 2015, largely because both states accuse the other of supporting each other’s opponents.55 Given that the 2015 protestors, educated people, civil society, and members of the opposition were considered by the regime to be constituted primarily of Tutsi, and that Rwanda is ruled by Tutsi President Paul Kagame, the singling out of Rwanda in this way could be construed as a subtle form of ethnicism, reinforced – much like in Burundi’s colonial past – using religious discourse. Explicit ethnic politics are also reported in SOS Médias.

For example, in response to ‘extensive human rights violations’ committed by the Imbonerakure, SOS reports allegations by the main opposition candidate, Rwasa, that the CNDD-FDD and its allies ‘spread messages inciting ethnic hatred, [Rwasa] then deplored the fact that he is considered a tool of the Tutsi, particularly the Hima’.56 This is an interesting characterisation of Rwasa given his history as a Hutu rebel during Burundi’s civil war in which he was allegedly involved in the massacre of over 150 Congolese Tutsi refugees in Gatumba.57

The Belgian outlets generally take a similar stance to SOS Médias; however, such explicit discussions of ethnic politics are altogether absent. The Belgian outlets also differ in their adoption of a somewhat paternalist tone, as can be seen in the Soir article discussing ‘miracles’ in need of explanation.58 Framing the president in terms of his religious discourse, the article opens by asserting that ‘the president of Burundi proudly proclaims that if it has been spared relatively, it is because “his country has put God first”’. Rather than a miracle, Braeckman intimates that the limited impact of the pandemic on Burundi is
more likely explained by the lack of credible statistics, the youthful population, and the rupture with the international community.

The real ‘miracles’ of the situation, according to Braeckman, are the fact that the election took place in relative calm, that Nkurunziza was not running, and that Rwasa was allowed to organise successful rallies. Rwasa’s mobilisation of the population, she notes, ‘has started worrying the authorities and the Imbonerakure (the government’s militia) are on the war footing and are already harassing Rwasa’s supporters. We are therefore waiting for a miracle, or a coup d’état on the eve of the elections’. Maintaining the irony, Braeckman concludes that the one miracle needed is to save flood victims in Gatumba, where over 28,000 people remain without housing. As the author notes, ‘Since international aid has deserted Burundi, these poor people live in catastrophic conditions’. Braeckman’s suggestion that the country needs a miracle in the absence of Western assistance has an air of paternalism.

References to Burundi’s poverty appear elsewhere in Le Soir’s coverage, with one article highlighting that ‘Burundi is ranked among the three poorest countries in the world’. The same article cites the World Bank ‘which estimates that 75% of the population live below the poverty line, against 65% when Mr. Nkurunziza came to power in 2005’. La Libre likewise adopts a paternalist tone (grouping Nkurunziza together with other world dictators without historical context) and also makes reference to Burundi as one of the three poorest countries in the world, quoting the same poverty statistic while emphasising Burundi’s reliance on international aid.

In summary, all outlets highlight the government’s use of religious discourse. However, while RTNB presents Nkurunziza as a benevolent, democratic, spiritual leader, SOS Médias and the Belgian outlets offer a reversed pattern of causal emplotment, suggesting that such discourse is a means to consolidate authoritarian control.

There are also narrative differences between SOS Médias and the Belgian outlets. While they all include discussions of the government’s human rights violations, use of intimidation, and other voting irregularities, the Belgian outlets are alone in emphasising Burundi’s increased poverty and dependence on international aid. The selective appropriation of these themes suggests that impoverished Burundians are left at the mercy of an authoritarian dictator and in need of Western assistance.

SOS Médias makes a different use of selective appropriation, excluding the theme of poverty but introducing that of ethnicity. This outlet highlights the government’s enmity with the West, civil society, Rwanda, and the opposition, who, the outlet suggests, are all accused of allying with each other.
The outlet also includes allegations that the government incites ethnic hatred and accuses the opposition of collaborating with Tutsi, particularly the Hima. Such an accusation demonstrates the persistence of the Hamitic myth and its reformulation, which positions Tutsi as a power-hungry collective bent on dominating the region, the same myth that underpinned the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi. *SOS Médias* thereby offers an altogether different use of causal emplotment to the other outlets by narrating the CNDD-FDD’s leadership not only as a dictatorship but also as a potentially genocidal government.

**The Government’s Handling of the Pandemic and Nkurunziza’s Death**

While the colonial legacy of an alliance between church and state is maintained by the Burundian government under Nkurunziza, the response to the Covid-19 pandemic is quite different to former colonial methods. Motivated by economic, scientific, and humanitarian interests (even if marred by racist condescension), Belgian colonial responses to previous disease outbreaks, such as the sleeping sickness epidemics of 1900–40, involved a coercive approach. Influenced and often administered by the Catholic Church, this involved controlling people’s movements and herding those suspected of infection into camps where they were permanently separated from their families, lived in poor conditions, faced a lack of food, and were injected with atoxyl, an arsenic compound that caused blindness in up to 20 per cent of patients.\(^6^1\)

Rather than adopting such a heavy-handed, medical approach, in a bid to gain popularity, the Nkurunziza government instead mobilised the legacy of African scepticism of Western medicine by trivialising the pandemic and ridiculing international public health advice. The narration of this response and the death of Nkurunziza varies across the outlets. For example, reflecting the government’s position, *RTNB* discusses the pandemic considerably less than the others, mentioning the terms Covid, coronavirus, or pandemic just 19 times compared to 120 mentions in *SOS*, 62 in *La Libre*, and 84 mentions in *Le Soir*. The few discussions of the pandemic in *RTNB* are paired with religious reassurances and authoritative advice, suggesting that the government is in control while minimising the potential danger of the virus.\(^6^2\) Significantly, there is no mention of Covid-19 in the outlet’s coverage of Nkurunziza’s unexpected death, which is reported as the result of ‘a heart attack’.\(^6^3\)

In contrast, *SOS Médias* frames the government’s handling of the pandemic in reference to its general authoritarianism, reporting, for instance, how the government expelled the team of WHO experts who were in Burundi to support the country’s coronavirus response.\(^6^4\) The same article highlights the
government’s minimisation of the pandemic, noting that ‘Burundi refuses to recognize the threat posed by this virus’.

Nkurunziza’s personal views on the virus are revealed in an article that appeared following the elections in which he reportedly ridiculed wearing a mask: ‘God controls the atmosphere in Burundi so that those [pandemics] do not reach us. Who wears a mask among you? No one. And yet you are doing well. There you go, God works miracles.’ When Nkurunziza died less than two weeks later, SOS Médias counters official reports of a heart attack, claiming that ‘he succumbed to respiratory complications linked to Covid-19.’ The outlet reveals that people in both his government and family were also Covid positive, including his wife, who was sent to Kenya for treatment, although her illness was denied by the government as part of its Covid-denial campaign.

The Belgian outlets present events similarly to SOS Médias, mentioning the government’s ejection of the WHO, Nkurunziza’s religious appraisals and denial of the threat posed by the virus, and that his death was eventually caused by the virus. One significant difference in Le Soir’s coverage relative to SOS is the outlet’s explicit attribution of Nkurunziza’s death to his government’s denial of the pandemic:

The denial of the coronavirus epidemic has had dramatic consequences in Burundi: it is confirmed that the outgoing president, Pierre Nkurunziza, was carried away by the virus and that the only ventilator available in the country, which was in the hospital King Khaled in Bujumbura, was sent in vain to Karusi, in the centre of the country.

As can be seen here, Le Soir also highlights the lack of infrastructure in the country. The article goes on to note that ‘King Khaled Hospital can no longer cope with the influx of patients, reagent products are lacking, Covid-19 patients are accommodated in the old maternity ward but beds are starting to run out’.

La Libre does not attribute responsibility to the government quite so explicitly as Le Soir, but it does also emphasise the country’s relative poverty as a hindrance to dealing with the pandemic. As seen elsewhere, the outlet highlights Burundi’s need for Western (Belgian) assistance, with an article discussing how the King Baudouin Foundation raised over €200,000 to assist with the pandemic in the DRC and Burundi.

In summary, RTNB makes only scarce reference to the pandemic, no mention of the government’s ejection of the WHO, and no mention of Covid when reporting Nkurunziza’s death. The few references to Covid are paired with religious and political reassurances, suggesting that the pandemic is under control. The other outlets all accentuate the potential seriousness of the virus in Burundi.
and highlight the government’s trivialisation of the pandemic and its ejection of the WHO. They also all report that Nkurunziza died as a result of contracting the virus and that the government attempted to conceal this. Overall, these outlets offer a reversed pattern of causal emplotment to RTNB by presenting the pandemic as out of control.

There are, nonetheless, some differences in these outlets’ use of narrative features. For example, only Le Soir directly attributes the death of Nkurunziza to the government’s handling of the pandemic, adopting a similar but more explicit line of causal emplotment compared to SOS or La Libre. Both Belgian outlets stand alone in emphasising Burundi’s poverty and lack of infrastructure, adopting a distinct line of causal emplotment that implies Burundi’s need for Western/Belgian assistance to handle the pandemic, maintaining the paternalist view that Burundi still relies on its former colonisers.

Representations of the Post-Nkurunziza Government

Following Évariste Ndayishimiye’s inauguration in Gitega on 18 June 2020, RTNB reports the new president delivering a consolation prayer:

it will be remembered that the late President Pierre Nkurunziza campaigned for dialogue between religions, cemented the links between the bureaucracy and the common people through community development and instilled in Burundians the love of God and prayer, the love of work, of the country and of mutual aid to unite society. […] By continuing in this way, you will have shown to the world that you are his disciples.

As can be seen, Nkurunziza is still depicted as a spiritual leader after his death and is credited with developing the country. Maintaining the colonial church-state relationship, Ndayshimiye, whose speech was ‘punctuated with biblical references’, appears to follow in these footsteps. In an article describing his inauguration, Ndayishimiye sets out a range of policy priorities yet makes no reference to the coronavirus pandemic, suggesting that, like for his predecessor, Covid-19 is not a primary concern.

SOS Médias offers an altogether different appraisal of the former regime, running the headline: ‘Nkurunziza’s disappearance: “he leaves without the truth about his crimes being known”’. The article cites Lewis Mudge, Human Rights Watch director for Central Africa, who highlights ‘the extrajudicial executions, tortures, disappearances and harassment of opposition’ during Nkurunziza’s ‘reign’. SOS Médias refrains from taking a position on the new president, however, and instead presents a range of views about the new regime from Burun-
dian refugees and international observers. Overall, SOS Médias’s coverage on the new regime is fairly neutral within the time frame studied.

*La Libre*, in contrast, takes an unequivocally pessimistic stance. In one article, Cros notes that ‘Mr Ndayishimiye was proclaimed the winner by the Constitutional Court, despite extensive fraud that the “independent” National Election Commission had to remove the election results from its website because they were so implausible.’ Considering the candidate himself, the outlet suggests that Ndayishimiye is ‘a man deemed malleable, dominated by the half-dozen CNDD-FDD generals who actually rule Burundi’. Having been placed in power by these generals, the outlet predicts that it is unlikely for him to oppose them since he never took action against previous abuses by the Imbonerakure. In contrast, *Le Soir* offers an overall positive appraisal of the election outcome. Unlike Cros and *La Libre*, Braeckman reports on the peaceful nature of the election and its impressive turnout, presenting Ndayishimiye as a moderate with a reputation for integrity.

In summary, *RTNB* and *La Libre* both project a continuation of Burundi’s pre-election trajectory, seeing in Ndayishimiye similar traits to Nkurunziza. However, while this is appraised positively by *RTNB* (selectively appropriating elements of the narrative that make both presidents seem like peaceful, democratic, and spiritual leaders), *La Libre* depicts them in negative terms (appropriating elements such as their use of religion to consolidate power, their indifference to criminal activity, and their overseeing an authoritarian system of governance). *Le Soir* and *SOS*, like *La Libre* selectively appropriate similar elements about the former regime, but *Le Soir* includes altogether different elements in its depiction of Ndayishimiye, portraying him as moderate and principled. Only *SOS*, which does not hesitate in its critique of Nkururnziza’s regime, remains neutral in its stance about the new regime, including both positive and negative appraisals of his electoral victory.

### Conclusions and Discussion

Overall, the outlets offer four distinct narratives of events. *RTNB* selectively appropriates elements of the narrative that depict Nkurunziza and Ndayishimiye as spiritual leaders who have brought Burundi peace and democracy. Despite the infection of the government’s inner circle with Covid-19 and Nkurunziza’s death, the outlet limits the discussion of the pandemic and minimises its impact. *SOS, La Libre,* and *Le Soir* also selectively appropriate the government’s religious discourse; however, they include other narrative elements and offer a different pattern of causal emplotment to *RTNB*. These outlets portray Nkurun-
ziza as an authoritarian leader who downplayed the Covid-19 pandemic, which eventually took his life. SOS is the only outlet to selectively appropriate the re-ethnicisation of Burundian politics in its coverage while the Belgian outlets are alone in inserting Burundi’s poverty into the story. This ultimately leads to quite different patterns of causal emplotment: the SOS Médias narrative is about the politicisation of ethnic tensions in a country with a history of ethnic conflict caused by colonialism and an ongoing refugee crisis. In contrast, the narrative in La Libre and Le Soir is about a poor country with a dictatorial regime that still needs the support of former colonial powers and their aid money. The main difference between the two Belgian outlets is that La Libre projects a negative future for Burundi, while Le Soir assesses the new government in relatively positive terms.

To understand why these narratives differ, it is useful to turn to Bruner’s concept of hermeneutic composability. Bruner highlights two issues affecting narrative interpretation: author intentionality and contextual factors (such as the background knowledge of both the storyteller and the listener). As he writes, narratives are not “unsponsored texts” to be taken as existing unintentionally. As the state broadcaster, it is unsurprising that RTNB generally portrays both Nkurunziza and Ndayishimiye in positive terms, and acts largely as a government mouthpiece. As independent media organisations, SOS Médias, La Libre, and Le Soir are freer to adopt a critical stance; however, this is not to say that their editors are without intentionality.

As an organisation with a tradition of reconciliation and one that remained in the country in order to continue reporting on politics and human rights, it is understandable that SOS Médias would draw attention to the use of extremist ethnic politics. Where the outcome of the situation is unclear, such as the future under Ndayishimiye, SOS Médias maintains its orientation towards peace and reconciliation by depicting voices from a range of opinions, without pre-empting possible future abuses of power. In more recent coverage, however, the organisation continues its commitment to human rights, reporting about deaths and arrests during Ndayishimiye’s first one hundred days in office, and highlighting the renewed ethnic violence of his regime. This includes reports about Imbonerakure attacks against Tutsi families, police encouraging the denouncement of Tutsi Kinyarwanda speakers within the country, and accusations of ethnicism within government institutions.

As independent media, the omission of ethnic politics in the Belgian outlets is intriguing given the Western tendency to present conflict in the Great Lakes region as ‘ethnic’. The ethnic frame was rolled out in representations of the 2015 conflict by both human rights organisations and the media, including in Belgium. Le Soir, for example, reported ‘fear of an ethnic turn’ just a day after
the first protests began and made multiple comparisons with Rwanda in 1994. So why, in this case, do the Belgian outlets remain silent on the issue of ethnicity, preferring instead to emphasise poverty?

The answer to this question may lie in the main victim of the government’s ‘ethnic discourse’. As discussed above, Rwasa is a Hutu and former rebel allegedly responsible for the mass murder of Tutsi but who has since rebranded his public profile as a figure of peace and reconciliation. The complexity of this ‘ethnic’ story thus goes well beyond the essentialist ‘ancient hatreds’ arguments, which presuppose irrational violence within an atavistic group. In this case, Tutsiphobia is applied by a Hutu who is relatively innocent of crimes (i.e. Ndayishimiye) to discredit a Hutu who is allegedly responsible for mass-murdering Tutsi. Thus rather than constituting essential characteristics of Hutu or Tutsi people, the case demonstrates a highly sophisticated political strategy to socially construct the opposition as a dangerous ‘Other’ by drawing on a racist ideology that was first brought to Burundi by the Belgians.

To explain the CNDD-FDD’s weaponisation of the ethnic (Hamitic) discourse would be difficult without recalling the colonial history of this ideology and Belgium would, therefore, have to acknowledge a role in contemporary Burundian affairs. Instead, the Belgian outlets turn to an alternative cliché: that of a poor African country in the hands of an authoritarian, ostentatiously religious dictator. Such a framing highlights Burundi’s ongoing need for Western assistance and enables the outlets to portray Belgium in a positive light, providing readers with a sense of cultural superiority.

Interestingly, this story unfolded around the same time as the death of George Floyd. During the time frame covered in this study, the Belgian outlets published a series of articles in response to the BLM protests, offering discussions about decolonising public space, creating positive relations with former colonies, initiating a parliamentary committee on the Belgian colonial past, as well as a discussion about ongoing racism in Belgium. These articles focus almost exclusively on the DRC, however. Despite the BLM movement, it seems that substantial discussions surrounding decolonisation and Burundi are yet to take place in these Belgian outlets. Based on this analysis, decolonised coverage would need to avoid essentialisations, stereotypes, and paternalist discourses that imply Burundi’s need of the West. It would also need to include a greater acknowledgement of the link between Burundi’s colonial past and its political present, explaining the background behind such phenomena as the church-state alliance or medical scepticism in Burundi.

In the spirit of this volume, which recognises that overly pessimistic conclusions about African affairs are yet another representational pitfall, some final comments are reserved for the laudable commitment to reconciliation
and responsible reporting observed in SOS Médias. Before the big shutdown of independent media in 2015, Burundi was praised for the freedom of expression and professionalism of its journalists.\textsuperscript{93} This vibrant media sector was forced into a rapid reconfiguration online as broadcasting centres were burned down and many journalists fled in exile.\textsuperscript{94} While this change limited popular access (on account of relatively low levels of literacy and internet access), the ongoing commitment of outlets like SOS Médias demonstrates the resilience of local journalism. By calling out the government’s use of colonial ethnic-religious discourse to consolidate power, while avoiding the essentialisms and dependency discourse presented in the Belgian outlets, media like SOS clearly play an important role in resisting the internal and external legacies of colonialism in Burundi. There are also signs that Ndayishimiye’s government is rekindling the media sector, suggesting that the future of Burundian journalism looks promising.\textsuperscript{95}
Notes

2. *Imbonerakure* in Kirundi means ‘Those who see far’. The name refers to the youth wing of the CNDD-FDD party, which was reportedly involved in threatening and intimidating people into voting for them.
6. Early accounts written by Europeans such as Jacques Maquet and Tutsi such as Alexis Kagame have been challenged by more recent work e.g. Jan Vansina, Antecedents to Modern Rwanda. The Nyiginya Kingdom (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004). Most scholars acknowledge, however, the relative fluidity of these identities. Patricia Daley, Gender and Genocide in Burundi: The Search for Spaces of Peace in the Great Lakes Region (Oxford: James Currey, 2007), p. 30.
7. Ibid., p. 49.
11. Ibid., p. 25.
14. Daley, Gender and Genocide, p. 13. The Hamitic myth lies behind genocidal ideologies in the region. In Burundi, it justified the mass killing of Hutu. In Rwanda, it was reformulated to construct Tutsi as inherently evil foreign conquerors, justifying the 1994 genocide.
15. Ibid., p. 34.
17. Raffoul, p. 10.
19. Ibid.
20. Raffoul, p. 11.
21. Ibid., p. 12.
25. Ibid., p. 22.
26. Ibid., p. 23.
27. Ibid., p. 30.
30. Ibid., p. 563.
33. Axel Muyamihuka C. Gossiaux, ‘L’Éducation Permanente en Lutte Contre le Racisme et la...


36. The Belgian government had already apologised for its role in the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda in 2000. Ibid., p. 16. This and all subsequent translations from French are my own.


42. ‘Burundi’ and ‘Nkurunziza’ were used to search the Belgian outlets; ‘Election’ and ‘Nkurunziza’ were used to search the Burundian ones.


45. Somers and Gibson, ‘Reclaiming the Epistemological “Other”…’, p. 28.


47. Baker, p. 155; Somers and Gibson, p. 29.


53. International Crisis Group, ‘Soutenir la population burundaise.’


62. E.g. RTNB, ‘Le Burundi célèbre…’


69. Marie-France Cros, ‘Comment la situation au Burundi…’


71. It took place two months ahead of schedule be-cause of Nkurunziza’s death.


75. Marie-France Cros, ‘Burundi: pourquoi le nou-veau président n’amènera que peu de change-ments?’, La Libre Belgique, 18 June 2020 <https://www.lalibre.be/international/africa/burundi-pourquoi-le-nouveau-president-n-ame-nera-que-peu-de-changements-5eb7e4ca76-50a6665a8c7db9> [accessed 03 March 2021]

77. Bruner, p. 10.
78. Ibid., p. 10.
83. Daley, Gender and Genocide, p. 5.
84. Purdevková, 'StopThisMovie and the Pitfalls...', p. 31; Williamson Sinalo, Narrating African Conflict News..., p. 5.
86. Eric Iramba, 'Burundi-elections: Agathon Rwasa'.
87. Daley, Gender and Genocide, p. 2.
88. The outlets make no mention of Belgium’s role in bringing Christianity to Burundi.
91. Martine Dubuisson, 'Une commission parlementaire sur le passé colonial belge dès la rentrée', Le Soir, 18 June 2020 <https://plus.lesoir.be/art/d-20200617-GGMA5C?referer=%2Farchives%2Frecherche%3Fdatefilter%3Dlastyear%26sort%3Ddesc%26start%3D0%26word%3Dburundi> [accessed 03 March 2021]
94. Falisse and Nkengurutse, 'From FM Radio Stations to Internet...', pp. 175–81.