

# Burundi

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Since its beginning after World War I, the Adventist work in the African country of Burundi has been challenged by strongholds of Islam and Catholicism and political upheaval.

## Background

For several centuries, Burundi was ruled by a strong monarchical dynasty. Nevertheless, it didn't remain hidden to external influences before the colonial period. Before 1858, some Swahili-speaking people who worked for Indians who had established themselves at the shores of the Indian Ocean entered the country in the quest of ivory. They reached Lake Tanganyika and organized commercial traffic by which they exchanged their products against ivory.<sup>1</sup> Burundi was also entered by Arab slave traders. Both merchants used the same road and the same cities located on the shores of Lake Tanganyika.<sup>2</sup>

The first Europeans were British soldiers of "Armee des Indes," represented by Sir Richard Burton and John Hannington Speke in 1858. Then the Protestant missionary David Livingstone and the American journalist Henry Morton Stanley came in 1871. These men were looking for information pertaining to the geography and the source of the river Nile. They were also interested to know the economic and political situation of the Central Africa region. Burton and Speke reached the Nyanza Lac plain in 1858. Later on, David Livingstone and Stanley, who were reporting for the *New York Herald*, went farther and reached the northern point of Lake Tanganyika.<sup>3</sup> The Austrian explorer Oskar Baumann and Count Gustav Adolf von Götzen of Germany arrived in the 1890s.<sup>4</sup>

The first colonialists to arrive were the Germans in 1896; it was with the Germans that Burundi experienced the colonial impact for the first time. When German soldiers entered Burundi, they were resisted by King Mwezi Gisabo. However, Burundian soldiers, *abadasigana*, could not resist German forces for long. King Mwezi Gisabo signed an agreement with Captain Robert von Beringe on June 6, 1903, known as the Kiganda Treaty. Under this treaty, the kingdom of Burundi lost her sovereignty and became a German protectorate.<sup>5</sup> Burundi was under German authority until 1916, when Germany lost its control over Burundi during World War I (1914–1918). With the defeat of Germany, the Orts-Milner convention of May 1919 between Belgium and England declared Burundi a territory under Mandate B, and Belgium agreed to the mandate terms of the administration of Burundi as its territory.<sup>6</sup> Until its independence in 1962, the region was a United Nations Trust Territory under

Belgium.<sup>7</sup> Burundi was under Belgian authority for more than 40 years. During the time that Belgium ruled over Burundi, the Seventh-day Adventist Church entered in 1925.

## Missionaries in Burundi

Prior to the arrival of missionaries, Burundians held a religious belief in a god called “Imana,” whom they considered to be creator and provider in addition to many other attributes, such as goodness and power, among others. The missionaries realized similarities between this Burundian god and the Christian God, so they maintained the name Imana for God after unsuccessfully trying to introduce “Mungu,” a Swahili word for God, in Burundi.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, before Christianity entered the country, Burundians had a common belief in God.<sup>9</sup> They knew Him as an invisible and inaccessible being who was real and omnipresent. None knew where His dwelling was: He could be found in a house, in a tree, or in a stone. Burundians believed that wherever one was, one would worship God.

The first European missionaries to attempt to enter Burundi were Catholics. After many unsuccessful attempts, King Mwezi Gisabo allowed the Roman Catholic clergy to establish missions in the area, and they launched their first mission at Mugeru on May 25, 1898.<sup>10</sup> The German Protestant missionaries entered Burundi in 1911, but they were cut short by World War I, which pushed Germans out of Burundi in 1916. Seventh-day Adventists came as the first Protestant missionaries after World War I. Toward the late 1920s and early 1930s, Protestants established mission stations on the sites of the former German missionaries at Kibimba, Musema, and Muyebe.<sup>11</sup>

## Adventism in Burundi

Adventism in Burundi arrived after Catholicism and Islam had already been introduced. Bringing in a new religion was not easy. “The entry into the area, already heavily dominated by the Catholic Church, caused a stir in the established denomination and the Adventist evangelists were actively barred from evangelizing by both the Chiefs and the Catholic White Fathers.”<sup>12</sup> However, by God’s providence, the work started and kept growing, reaching other corners of the country. The Adventist church in Burundi began from the work of David Elias Delhove, a Belgian Adventist missionary who had worked in Kenya and Rwanda before arriving in Burundi in 1925 to establish a mission there (then known as Urundi).<sup>13</sup>

Delhove reached Burundi with some Rwandese converts who carried his luggage and could assist him in teaching and preaching; he also could speak Kinyarwanda. He came from Gitwe, Rwanda, which already had two mission fields: Gitwe and Rwankeri. At that time, the modern nations of Rwanda and Burundi were jointly administered as the Ruanda-Urundi territory, so he was just moving to another section of the same country.<sup>14</sup> He started his work in Buganda, which is now known as the birthplace of Adventism in Burundi.

By the time Delhove started his mission work in Burundi, the Roman Catholic Church had established its presence in the northern, eastern, western, and central parts of the country.<sup>15</sup> He settled in Buganda, where he secured a big portion of land because it was not inhabited due to the weather, which was very hot. The place also had many animals, such as elephants, tigers, and antelopes, as well as snakes. Thus, the people lived in the hills that surround the plain of the Rusizi River. Those hills included Cunywe, Gahongore, Rugoma, Mugimbu, Ruhagarika, Manege, Mirombero, Mahande, and Ngoma.

The choice of Buganda for mission work distanced Delhove from the Catholic missionaries. He avoided unnecessary conflict with Catholic white fathers because he was the first Protestant missionary to enter Burundi after World War I. Buganda was strategically located, being not far (some 63 kilometers, or 39 miles) from Usumbura, which was the capital city of Ruanda-Urundi territory. It was on the road running north to Cangugu in Rwanda but very near Cibitoke, a Belgian post by then. Delhove was well equipped for dealing with both the colonial government and the indigenous leaders, the government because of his past record as a Belgian army servant during World War I, and the indigenous leaders because of his ability to communicate in Kinyarwanda, which is in many respects is similar to Kirundi, the main language in Burundi.<sup>16</sup>

Delhove worked hard to lay the foundation of strong and aggressive work in a hostile environment where mosquitoes, leopards, and elephants were a threat to people's lives. He protected himself against those physical threats by building permanent houses with the help of the population. From the year he settled at Buganda until 1928, he laid a strong foundation for the Adventist church. He rooted the Adventist message in the Buganda region through evangelism, education, and health programs. His target was to meet people's spiritual, mental, and physical needs. He organized camp meetings where the gospel was preached and health topics were discussed. This made those camp meetings very attractive in an area where some people were hostile to biblical truth because they were alcoholics, polygamists, and smokers, and many practiced traditional beliefs. Besides that, he directed at least two schools, opened a dispensary, and brought in people who knew how to treat malaria, a common disease in that area.

As a result of those efforts, people in general and especially the indigenous chiefs became interested in the Adventist message. One day, a chief attended Sabbath worship services together with 188 of his subjects.<sup>17</sup> Thus, Delhove organized the very first Burundian baptism at Kaburantwa River, which is located about seven kilometers (four miles) from today's Buganda mission station.<sup>18</sup>

Though the beginning was small, church membership kept increasing, and by the end of 1935, they had more than doubled their growth numbers to two-and-a-half times their estimates. In December 1932, the first 100 songbooks in the Kinyarwanda language were brought to Urundi, and though Kirundi differs from Kinyarwanda, those songbooks were taken up with enthusiasm. Writing in January 1933, Bozarth<sup>9</sup> declared, "Never have I seen people so eager to accept and follow the truth as they are in Ruanda-Urundi today." It may be important to note that, particularly in Burundi, the majority of the people who were joining the church were Hutu. Part of the

reason is that the church was founded in Cibitoke Province, where the rural population was primarily Hutu.<sup>20</sup>

In 1929, the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Burundi was officially recognized among other religious bodies by a king's decision. The 1932 SDA Yearbook indicates that Urundi and Ruanda are part of the territory of the Central African Union Mission, which contains the West Urundi Mission Field. It lists the Congo Union Mission Field having the territory of The Belgian Congo excepting the Kivu District, and says it was organized in 1925. The 1933 SDA Yearbook lists the Buganda Mission as part of the Congo Union Mission.<sup>21</sup>

Nevertheless, Buganda station experienced discontinuity in leadership. The frequent change of leaders and a vacuum of leadership in crucial times because of the furloughs of the missionaries affected the work. For instance, when Delhove established Buganda Mission, he remained there for a year, April 1925 to April 1926. From April 1926 to 1927, the work was taken over by one of the Rwandese missionaries Delhove had arrived with. The Rwandese missionary ran the station for a year before Delhove came back from his furlough to resume his work from 1927 to June 10, 1928. Then came Maxime Duplouy, a French missionary, who took over from June 22, 1928, to early 1932. He was followed by Valentine Davies from March 1931 to 1936. In 1937, Hans J. Moolman of South Africa arrived to run the Ndora Mission, and he was followed by W. R. Vail (April 1938–February 1941).

All the same, Buganda as a mission station site had become a center of influence, but as time went by, its influence declined. In their efforts to spread the gospel across the country, missionaries reached the high hills of Ndora, not far away from Buganda, and found them very cool and favorable to live in. So, in 1928, they decided to move from Buganda to Ndora, where they established the second mission. The new location provided for better health and weather conditions, and it was well located among people who could attend the camp meetings. That is how Ndora became the second nucleus of Adventism in Burundi. Thus, the headquarters of the field moved from Buganda to Ndora. The work at Buganda remained handicapped because the change of the site involved shifting of financial resources, leadership, and investment to another location.

Though the work at Ndora started from scratch, it developed significantly. It developed within Cibitoke, the same political administrative entity where Buganda was located, and even reached the neighboring provinces. The Adventist message spread from Ndora, the field station, to other locations. It spread beyond the Kibira forest and reached Yanza and even Gatunda in the southern part of Rwanda. It spread toward Bugarama, Kuwinteko, and Ruheru in Rwanda, where Magagara Nehemie, Burindege Elie, and Bikebere David were sent from Ndora as frontline workers. The work also spread along the plain of the Rusizi River, in Congo, where those who worked were called *Abavunyi*, meaning those in charge of conversion.<sup>22</sup> The work spread to Muyinga, Cankuzo, Ruyigi, and Gitega, where Munyenkiko Ezeckiel and Nyagatema Elie worked as field administrators.

The Adventist work was confined in Cibitoke for several decades, and as a result of that, several churches have been planted. From 1925 to 1928, missionaries opened churches at Ndora, Bukinanyana, Butahana, Rubona, Mugina, and Rugombo; the church membership increased significantly. Some of the first receivers of the

Adventist faith in the region later on became workers in the denomination as licensed and authorized ministers: Jonas Kaduha, Laban Biyayire, Etienne Mabwejagu, Joel Bahahaje, Timothee Bivugire, Abel Barugerure, Ezechiel Ndategetse, Simeon Ntabaza, Lazaro Bapfinzira, Daniel Najenzi, Daniel Ntahondi, Esdras Maganga, Enosi Ntiviyiregeza, Naason Gihanda, Nahum Ndabiye, Salatiel Kabatetse, Daniel Kiburago, Salatiel Ntashimwe, Nehemia Magagara, Enias Karamye, Abias Gahise, Nathanael Ntiharira, Ephraim Ntahomvyariye, Simeon Kadigi, Enos Misigaro, Andre Mahura, Eliazar Harayabo, Phenias Rushimatira, Elizaphan Batuko, and Lazaro Bariyerurutsa.<sup>23</sup> They constituted the very first generation of native Burundian Adventist workers.

The spread of the good news of salvation was strengthened by a solid school program. The western part of the country, which contained the major portion of the church membership, started schools in different locations, and native teachers were sent to open schools in other provinces. The locations that were far from the road ran a school program, which was limited to the first three years of school. Those locations included Muramba, Buhayira, Muzenga, Butosho, Bubenga, Rubona, Kabogo, and Bukinanyana. The locations that were near the road were called the "Centers," and their school program was limited to the first six years of school. Those locations included Ndora, Buganda, Butahana, Mugina, and Magarama. Prior to 1961, only the school of Ndora could offer the seventh and eighth grades.<sup>24</sup> From April 1961, Ndora Mission was authorized to offer the ninth grade. Before Kivoga School was started in 1964, students who wished to go higher attended the Seminaire Adventiste at Gitwe, Rwanda.<sup>25</sup>

Meanwhile, further development within the church at a high level and in political life impacted the mission in Burundi. In 1931, the Urundi Mission was organized and officially became part of the Congo Union Mission, which was transferred from the Northern European Division (NED) to the Southern African Division.<sup>26</sup> In 1936, a second mission station was established at Ndora, not far from Buganda.<sup>27</sup> The work in Ruanda-Urundi was under the Central African Union Mission, which was organized in 1928 under C. W. Bozarth. They registered the legal organization as Mission Evangelique des Adventistes du Septieme Jour, and Bozarth was the legal representative for both Congo and Ruanda-Urundi.<sup>28</sup>

In 1947 Urundi was joined to the Ruanda-Urundi Field, with headquarters located at Gitwe, in Ruanda. This relationship continued with varying degrees of change until January 1960, when the country became the Urundi Field, with headquarters at Ndora. In 1963 the Burundi Field was divided into two parts along the main road running north from the capital, Bujumbura, to Kayanza. The western section, which contained the major portion of the church membership, is now known as the West Burundi Field, with the officers as formerly in Urundi Field; the east section was administered directly from the Central African Union office in Bujumbura until 1964, when it was organized as the East Burundi Field.<sup>29</sup>

In 1950, the government devised a plan of moving the population from the mountains to the Rusizi valley for agricultural purposes.<sup>30</sup> Many people who had received the Adventist message moved to the plain with their Adventist faith. As a result, the church was strengthened in the area around the former Buganda mission. This

led native leaders to take action to bring the field headquarters back to Buganda.

Later on, the political crisis that erupted in Congo following the period of independence led to the organization of Ruanda-Urundi Union in 1960, separating it from the Congo Union Mission. The headquarters of the Congo Rwanda-Urundi Union Mission, then located at Elizabethville (Lubumbashi), was transferred to Bujumbura, Burundi. The church in the Ruanda-Urundi region came under the leadership of the Central African Union. Meanwhile, the Adventist church continued to grow tremendously. By 1963, the joint membership of the church in both Rwanda and Burundi stood at 55,583.<sup>31</sup> By this time, the Central African Union had been renamed the Ruanda-Urundi Union, comprising four fields, three of which were in Rwanda and one in Burundi, the West Burundi Field, which comprised the entire nation of Burundi together with two communes in Rwanda-Buyenzi and Nyarugura.<sup>32</sup>

In 1964, Burundi's relations with neighboring Rwanda became frosty. Thus, the Ruanda-Urundi Union was renamed the Central Africa Union, partly because the two nations had broken off diplomatic relations, necessitating a change of name. The headquarters continued to be in Bujumbura, and this obviously made it difficult for the Adventist church to operate in both Rwanda and Burundi now that the two nations had broken off diplomatic relations. The Burundi Field, which also incorporated some two provinces in Rwanda, was reorganized to sever the ties with Rwanda.<sup>33</sup> A second field was organized in Burundi: the East Burundi Field, based in Gitega, while the older Burundi Field was renamed the West Burundi Field and remained in Ndora.

## Conclusion

Starting with Delhove, missionaries were able to root the Adventist hope and message in Burundi. The work started at Buganda, which stood as the birthplace of Adventism in Burundi, and spread to other locations. Delhove was a man of experience from his background as a soldier in the Belgian Army and a church employee in Kenya and Rwanda, which assisted him in Burundi. Thus, he was able to transform Buganda into an Adventist center of influence. After he built permanent houses to protect himself against tough weather conditions and wild animals, he pursued his mission by trying to meet the physical and spiritual needs of the neighboring population. Through the establishment of mission schools, the launch of a dispensary to help the inhabitants to fight against malaria, and the open discussion in camp meetings on health and family matters, Delhove spread the good news of salvation.

For more than three decades, the Ndora mission station was the shining star of Adventism in Burundi, although its glory faded when the seat of the church returned to Buganda. The beginning of Adventism in Burundi was difficult. However, despite the slow beginning, the Adventist message kept growing, and church membership, increasing. The church in Burundi underwent different stages of organization. It started as one field comprising the entire nation of Burundi, the West Burundi Field. Then it joined to the Belgian Congo and Rwanda. Finally, for political reasons, it was separated from those neighboring countries. From that time, it has evolved as a single

entity until it was reorganized into two, three, and then four different fields in 2018.

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## NOTES

1. Émile Mworoha, *Historie du Burundi: Des origines à la fin du XIXe siècle*(Paris: Hatier International, 1987), 236–237.

2. Ibid., 240.

3. Ibid., 242.
4. Godfrey K. Sang, *A Church Captured: The Battle for the Control of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Burundi* November 2019, 3.
5. Joseph Gahama, *Le Burundi sous l'administration Belge: La période du Mandat 1919–1939*(Paris: Karthala, 2001), 20.
6. *Atlas du Burundi* (Florence, Italie: ABC, 2012), 19.
7. Sang, *A Church Captured*, 3.
8. Samuel Ndikumana, *The Fruit of a Work String: Beginnings of Seventh-day Adventism in Burundi*(research paper, Friedensau Adventist University, 2010), 5.
9. Jean Baptiste Ntahokaja, *Imigenzo y'Ikirundi* (Bujumbura, Burundi: Universite du Burundi, 1978), 123.
10. Ndikumana, *Fruit of a Work String*.
11. Ibid.
12. Sang, *A Church Captured*, 5.
13. Ibid., 5.
14. Ibid., 4.
15. Ndikumana, *Fruit of a Work String*, 9.
16. Ibid., 11.
17. Ibid., 10.
18. Ibid., 11.
19. Bozarth was a church administrator who witnessed the organization of the work in Ruanda-Urundi as Central African Union Mission in 1928.
20. Sang, *A Church Captured*, 6.
21. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1932, 1933).
22. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1967), 250.
23. Barute David and Baranyizigiye Uzziel, retired pastors from North West Burundi Mission, Buganda, interview, October 23, 2019.
24. Ibid.
25. David and Uzziel, interview. For further information, see Mrs. Pennina Ndabagoranywe, a widow of late Pastor Ndaruzaniye Amiel.

26. Ibid.

27. *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*, 2nd ed. (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1996), s.v. "Burundi." *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1937).

28. Sang, *A Church Captured*, 4.

29. Ibid.

30. Ibid.

31. *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*, s.v. "Burundi."

32. Ndikumana, *Fruit of a Work String*, 15.

33. Sang, *A Church Captured*, 8.

34. Ibid.

35. Ibid.

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