

Oral History in Africa: Giving Voice, Understanding Conflict and Promoting Peace

Burundi

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<http://residents.ihouse-nyc.org/davisjournals11>

‘Oral History in Africa’ collected oral history to promote peace – to record stories and provide a voice to the millions of people who for years have remained the anonymous and silent victims of civil war. We partnered with local organizations, including one of the Great Lakes region’s most respected post-conflict and trauma organizations Traumatic Healing and Reconciliation Services (THARS), and the Centre d’encadrement et du Developpement des Anciens Combattants au Burundi (CEDAC - The Center for Management and Development of Veterans in Burundi).

We had no additional source of funding beyond the Davis Projects for Peace.

After partnering with local contacts in Burundi and interviewing experts in New York, we travelled to Burundi in late May for three weeks of intensive on-the-ground interviews and cultural immersion. We interviewed more than three-dozen individuals, conducted six focus groups and made three field visits (involving several days in the field) during our time in Burundi. Though we were able to stay within our budget, accommodation and goods in Bujumbura were more expensive than we had expected. Our partnerships with local organizations were extremely valuable, although we still encountered some challenges, primarily due to the country’s lack of development. Power outages are common, and we found the phone and internet communications to be slow and often not functional. The lack of infrastructure also meant that village settings were not especially conducive to collecting emotive, highly personal oral histories. It is also the custom in Burundi to discuss war experiences in a group setting, which challenges the process of western oral history, with its emphasis on the individual.

We consider our greatest success the way in which we were able to connect with our interviewees and form enduring partnerships with local organizations. We were not expecting the degree to which the process of sharing brought joy and some peace to our interviewees.

Beneficiaries encompassed hundreds of Burundians from the hilltops of Kitega to an amphitheater in the dusty fields of Maramvya province. At an institutional level, non-governmental organizations – both local and international – praised our engagement for the way in which it created understanding and dialogue. More broadly, beneficiaries include audiences and scholars interested in Burundi’s history, and those seeking a broader understanding of conflict, peace, and reconciliation.

Our oral histories, recorded and transcribed, will endure in the possession of our local partners, particularly THARS (www.thars.org) and CEDAC (www.cedac.webs.com). Our work will also contribute to Columbia University’s Oral History Research Center, the United States’ foremost institution for oral history. It will also aid academics and institutions who are focused on conflict and resolution in Burundi. We hope that our interviews will animate scholarship, enlighten debate, and deepen understanding well into the future.

Section Two

Our understanding of peace shares the fullness of vision illuminated in the philosophy and practice of Kathryn W. Davis and Nelson Mandela. For us, as for Kathryn W. Davis, peace is predicated on ‘talking and dialogue that fosters understanding and reconciliation.’ We also share Nelson Mandela’s faith in the peace-making imperatives of ‘goodness’ and ‘forgiveness’ and his

emphasis on productive, emancipatory 'work' with a former enemy. Our oral history achieved this, for the short and long-term, by bringing together various parties affected by Burundi's conflict, aiding their voice, and providing them with an opportunity to reflect on the violence, understand barriers and factors that promote violence, and forge a peaceful path forward for their country. The peaceful contribution of our project was captured by one of our interviewees: he had, historically, thought of his country as divided between Hutu and Tutsi, but after reflection and conversation, realized 'we are all brothers in Burundi.'

This project in many respects changed the way we think about the world and ourselves. The experience undercut conceptions of conflict based on ethnic divides. Our experience underlined the oppressiveness of poverty in Burundi, and the extent to which the poverty can challenge peace. The pervasive poverty is manifest in interviewees' constant calls for jobs and foreign aid, though poverty also animated entrepreneurial spirit. We were also struck by Burundians willingness, after decades of conflict, to move on and overcome seemingly intractable ethnic cleavages. There was a willingness to forget and forgive, in contrast to the western emphasis on punishment and retribution.

At times, we found our interviews harrowing, but respondents say the interviews were rewarding and meaningful. They were pleased that their stories will spread beyond Burundi's borders, and inform a broader approach to resolving conflict and promoting peace. We have also found the experience incredibly rewarding and inspiring. We marveled at man's capacity to inflict violence, and also to forgive.

Thank you so much for the opportunity.
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An ex-combatant, who now works as a goat-herder, in the village in Bubanza province he abandoned during the war. He speaks about his experiences, and his new, peaceful life. In the background are the village goats he cares for, and his new friends and family.



Eric, a former child soldier, performs a welcome song with four young orphans who lost their parents in the war. Eric has founded CEDAC, an NGO that assists former combatants and collects munitions. He also founded this orphanage.