

**Book, Dialogue, and the Clean Light that Lasts: Burundi**  
**The College of Idaho**  
**June 17- July 14, 2019**  
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**CONTEXT:** Burundi is a landlocked country in East-Central Africa that has suffered from continuous civil war. Currently, Burundi has a population of 11 million, comprised of two main ethnic groups: the Hutu and the Tutsi. The third ethnic group is the Twa, or Batwa, and represent only 1% of the population. Burundi, just like Rwanda, is a place where ethnic differences are taboo topics since nobody wants to recall the 1972 genocide against Tutsis in Burundi or The Rwandan genocide in 1994. Living in a UWC and now at a liberal arts college in Idaho opened up these discussions that I would rather not have had prior then. These discussions however made me reflect on this minority group that is Twa, that till date is living the nightmare that caused Hutus to resent Tutsis and later bring about the Tutsi genocide. The Twa are traditionally a group of hunters that have been excluded and discriminated against in the Burundian society. As someone from the other two ethnic groups, I am taught not to speak with, nor associate myself with a Twa at all. On a broader national perspective, this ethnic segregation has made it that the Batwa community has regressed overtime in terms of prosperity. Indeed, the Twa do not have access to basic necessities such as healthcare, school, as they have secluded themselves in the remote rural areas of Burundi. I have grown up to believe that Twa were savages unable to socialize like normal human beings; that Twa are to be considered as less of, or non-deserving of normal human treatment, including that they are not allowed to vote nor be represented in the government. The Batwa people furthermore have no access to electricity, which is a big hindrance to the children's education in that they are unable to study at home. The project I am proposing aims at reaching out to this segregated community by the building of a solar-powered study center that will allow the Twa and other ethnic youth the opportunity to get a better chance to education, an opportunity they have been denied for decades. The study center would help alleviate the number of dropouts due to lack of electricity and conducive facilities to do after-school work.

**THE POINT AT ISSUE:** Considering that Burundi is the second poorest country in the world, the Twa population encounters more pronounced social and economic barriers to get access to employment and quality education. From a broad perspective, most Burundians live under the line of poverty. A recent census showed that only 1% of Burundi has access to electricity while only 40% of the 11 million has access to basic education. Furthermore, 80 % of these 40% dropout in secondary school. Minority groups such as Twa's suffer the most since the stigma around them according to social etiquette prevents them from getting as far as secondary education, let alone finding quality jobs.

**SOLUTIONS PROPOSED:** I am proposing holding a 4-week educational camp in the rural region of Mwaro province, where we will build the study center together with local mostly Twa youth. This educational camp would include participatory workshops to provide the Burundian Twa an opportunity to work together with more regional youth from the other ethnic groups to build this center that will benefit the students in that region as a whole. I have established that social disintegration is the biggest barrier that Twa's face to their striving in their own home country. To remediate this problem, I propose empowering these youth into the skillful and capable people I know they can become through education. I also aim at fostering discussions between ethnicities that are never meant to interact according to Burundian social etiquette.

**PARTNERSHIPS:** Being from the area, I remember growing up with electrical power being shut off and thereby hindering my schoolwork. The power issue led to a drop in my grades as the homework load increased with secondary school. As a result of such difficulties, my older sister eventually dropped out and I would had to too, if it were not for the scholarship I was awarded to attend UWCSA. My sponsors gave me the push I needed to unleash my full potential. I believe, therefore, that everyone, including Twa

individuals can achieve big if given a little bit of support. The leader of YBSP (Youth Building in Synergy to end poverty), Jean Marie Nsengumuremyi, a local activist group for the Twa rights has accepted my invitation to partner for this project and share with me his expertise mobilizing Burundi youth to rise above past ethnic feuds and work together to end Twa discrimination. I also am currently in contact with one of the rare Twa's who successfully finished secondary and tertiary education. Her name is Christine Mahoro and lives among the community where the educational camp will be held. She has accepted to help with all the official paperwork needed to launch the study center as it will duly be a Twa project site terrain.

**OUTLINE:** The project will take place in a span of 4 weeks from June 17<sup>th</sup> to July 14<sup>th</sup>:

**June 17<sup>th</sup> – July 1<sup>st</sup>:** In the first 2 weeks, hired builders will coordinate with me and the group of 40-50 local youth to build their very own first solar-powered study center that will facilitate their learning process. This will be a period where I will get to know this youth and have them engage in group discussions with their peers over lunch breaks about issues they face as ethnically different individuals. The end goal of this part is to open up cross-cultural dialogue for these youth to realize that there is beauty and strength in diversity and that what divides us as young Burundians pales in comparison with what unites us: thirst for peace and prosperity in our country.

**July 1<sup>st</sup>- July 13<sup>th</sup>:** This stage of the project will be a focus on the Twa youth. After the completion of the building center, I will select, in collaboration with my partners, a group of the top 20 Twa youth that showed the most commitment to the building project to become trainees. These trainees will be given the opportunity to follow two weeks of computer lessons as well as further mentoring lessons to better go through life as responsible youth that are to become agents of prosperity in Burundi. Over these two weeks there will be several more participatory workshops to emphasize community trust and sanitation such as the art of making reusable pads for the girls in the community who are still unable to go to school when they are in their periods.

**SUSTAINABILITY AND EXPECTED OUTCOMES:** The aim of this project is to provide a lit-up study center for the Batwa students to visit after school and gain exposure to e-technology. E-knowledge will better position the Twa youth in the search for employment. Indeed, the job market increasingly requires basic IT skills. The study center will be one of the first of eco-friendly initiatives in Burundi as it will be operating on solar energy taking advantage of Burundi's mostly sunny climate. This aspect of the study center ensures it can continue to run at no financial costs. Empowering these young Twa students will be watering the seed that the YBSP planted and hence foster cross-cultural acceptance of Twa's within the Burundian community. This juvenile group of Hutus, Tutsi and Twa will have an experience whereby they are pushed to reflect on otherwise taboo subjects in Burundi in-between building their own study center equipped with books and two desktops to begin with. The project will therefore channel peace and development through collaboration of Twa, Hutu and Tutsi young Burundians. YBSP and Ms. Christine Mahoro will work jointly to ensure that the select 20 Twa are giving back to the community by teaching the skills acquired over the last two weeks of the project. This is a measure that would foster future interaction among the ethnically different locals. Ms. Christine Mahoro furthermore volunteered to avail herself as a tutor 5 days a week to assist with the students who need help after school. She, in the same process, will be monitoring the good use of the study-center facilities and equipment. The students too, since they will have built the center themselves are expected to act responsibly and take good care of the study center.