

# Rwagasore – Africa's betrayed hero

More than a century ago, at the height of a deadly war between the King of Burundi Mwezi Gisabo and the German occupying forces that lasted almost 7 years, a man stood out for his courage. Bihome was his name. While King Mwezi was surrounded by the enemy, Bihome offered to wear the King's clothes so that the former, taking advantage of the confusion surrounding the fierce fighting, could flee. Bihome thus became a martyr, giving the full measure of what was a fighter for the dignity of the Burundi people.

The duration of this struggle, despite the clear technological superiority of the German army, was the fruit of the determination of the King and his fighters, the *Abadasigana*. Unfortunately, the struggle was cut short by the treachery of a group of Burundian princes and chiefs who decided to cross over and join the German forces. These princes and chiefs, far from putting aside their quarrels with the King so as to fight a common enemy, chose rather to ally with the Germans to advance their petty sectarian interests. For them, the sectarian interests took precedence over national interests. Much as Bihome's conduct had given full measure to heroism, the treachery of the princes and chiefs gave the full measure of what a collaborator, a saboteur, indeed a traitor to their nation looked like.

Prince Louis Rwagasore was very much created in the mould of Bihome. Rwagasore was the great grandson of Mwezi Gisabo. He emerged to the political scene as a key agitator for Burundi's independence.

Like Bihome, Rwagasore faced princes and chiefs, collaborators of the colonial power, willing to reject independence in exchange for juicy political positions within the colonial

government. Like Bihome, Rwagasore paid with his life for his unconditional loyalty to the cause for a dignified and independent Burundi and for a vision that was at odds with those of the colonialists and their domestic collaborators. He was killed shortly before the declaration of independence on October 13, 1961.

From his death it became clear that beyond the personal sacrifices that one is ready to concede, the conception that one has of their country, the interests that he or she promotes and the alliances that one establishes in this continued struggle for a dignified people are essential indicators to the sincerity of this word which we often use and abuse: Patriotism.

### **The Prince's concept of Burundi**

If one were to sum up the relationship that Prince Rwagasore had with the people he was trying to mobilize, the words of Nkwameh Krumah come to mind: "Go to the people, live among them, learn from them, serve them, plan with them, start with what they know, and build on what they have".

[The Prince created two trade and consumer cooperatives](#) (CCB and CCRU) for the benefit of Burundian producers, traders and consumers. These became vehicles for mobilizing a large segment of the various components of society to unite around the independence cause, to organize acts of civil disobedience, and to boycott the purchase of colonial products. Rwagasore was a brilliant organizer, something he shared in common with the nationalist struggle's heroes across the African continent where the cause of Burundi was able to gain sympathy and transnational and pan-African support in Lumumba's Congo and Nyerere's Tanganyika.

This privileged relationship between the Prince and his people, only reinforced his conception of a [one and indivisible Burundian nation](#) around which all Burundians, from

princes to the poor, of all social and professional categories, would build the foundation of a new liberated and inclusive society.

Prince Rwagasore shared this concept in a letter addressed to one of the agents of the colonial power, a Belgian citizen named Albert Maus. But Maus was no ordinary citizen.

Maus was one among many agents of the colonial administration orchestrating the political and ethnic turmoil which was already shaking the elite classes during the period preceding independence both in Burundi and Rwanda- then administered by Belgium as one entity known as Rwanda-Urundi. Albert Maus was also the creator of the political party Aprosoma in Rwanda, a movement whose leader had published the Hutu commandments and which was at the forefront of the propagation of the Hutu Power ideology. Members of Aprosoma and Parmehutu who advocated for a postponement of Rwanda's independence had just overthrown the Rwandan monarchy and had carried out the first massacres targeting Tutsi in the Great Lakes region in 1959.

Prince Rwagasore worked around the clock to prevent Albert Maus from exporting his sinister project to Burundi. In the letter mentioned above, Rwagasore countered Maus ethnic-centered narrative of Burundi's issues; issues which he summed up in a central argument: "the Burundian problem was not an ethnic problem opposing the Hutu to the Tutsi, but a problem of social justice where the concerns of ordinary citizens, whatever their origins, noble or modest, should be the priority of the political action and discourse". Rwagasore also took the opportunity to recall that if such ethnic tensions existed in the Burundian society at the time, it was largely a consequence of the discriminatory policies imposed by the colonial administration during the fifty years during which the best schools and the top political positions were reserved for the so called Tutsi elite. How then, he continued, could an agent of the same administration sneakily try to pull apart the population using this newly and

artificially created elite as scapegoats or pawns in a game just because a large section of society was demanding independence?

Just like his great grandfather Mwezi Gisabo who had fought to prevent colonization, Prince Rwagasore intended to lead Burundians to independence. He had also given his party militants the name *Abadasigana*, which was also the name of the heroic combatants of his great grandfather. *Abadasigana*, therefore, was a symbolism of resistance. It was also the concept around which the independence movement was built in pursuit of a single and indivisible nation. However, like the saboteurs had done to his grandfather by siding with Germany's occupying forces, the collaborators within the elite's circles chose to side with the Belgian colonial administration. What happened in Burundi thereafter was merely a consequence of this sabotage of historical proportions.

### **Saboteurs at work**

"I ask you to judge me by the enemies I have made," said Franklin Delano Roosevelt. One could also argue that the friends we make are essential indicators of the interests that we hold dear and measuring tools of the judgment that one should have of a person's character. Prince Rwagasore was the hero of his people, the friend of great figures in the continent's independence struggle like Nyerere and Lumumba and the enemy of the colonial administration. One could hardly doubt Rwagasore's motives, his determination despite the threats hanging over his life, his sincerity and the merits of the cause he was defending.

Facing the prince were two movements that were supporting the idea of an indefinitely delayed independence. One advanced an ethnic cause at the expense of a nationalist project; the other consisted of the descendants of dethroned princes. However, both were supported by the colonial administration and espoused little interest in the concerns of ordinary

citizens; they were undeniably greedy for power. The saboteurs succeeded in undermining the struggle for independence by playing accessories to the assassination of Prince Rwagasore at the orders of the colonial masters who still exercised overwhelming control over their thinking and practice.

If Rwagasore's assassination did not prevent Burundi from gaining independence, it signaled the slow but certain death of the national project and the ultimate end of the concept of a one and indivisible nation. This is the significance of Prince Rwagasore as a political figure in Burundi's contemporary politics.

In a way, just as the betrayal of some elites had forced King Mwezi Gisabo to submit to German occupation and enabled the success of the colonial project, the betrayal and the subsequent assassination of Prince Rwagasore ushered in the success of the neocolonialist project. Crucially, a divided Burundi would later become an easy prey for those who wished to maintain their spheres of influence in the former colonies and their imperialist ambitions for control over African governments. Since Rwagasore's demise, nationalist ambitions have been replaced by ethnic-based discourses and discriminatory policies with no one left to defend the Burundi as a collective.

### **Who will wake up Rwagasore's vision**

The tragedy in most African countries is that the most vocal and promoted voices who oppose these saboteurs are pseudo-intellectuals in predisposition; they seek intellectual inspiration from the same metropolis that saboteurs get their orders.

In today's Burundi, leaders whose [hate speeches](#) have been inciting ethnic and [political violence](#) are opposed to the promoters of a Burundi with two nations to which ethnic quotas, as prescribed by the Arusha accords, should be

allocated. The former carry forward the legacy of colonialism that subscribes to divide and rule patterns of thought and practice. The latter seek to institute and freeze these subdivisions into rigid identities by giving the representatives of these artificial entities the prerogative to defend the interests of their respective "groups". Moreover, only a handful of individuals in both warring factions care enough to root their agitation fight around the aspirations of ordinary citizens.

With the people held captive to such petty politics, they have no choice other than to watch a pathetic spectacle where the adversaries compete for the attention, favors, and dictates of the old colonial powers.

In the contemporary crisis, to a government which has turned its back on its people and has isolated itself regionally, the only alternative is an opposition that speaks to Western capitals and is struggling to be heard in the region and at home.

While the colonizer has found saboteurs to carry forward his legacy, the question of who will take up Prince Rwagasore's vision elicits the following questions: What do we do with the wise counsel of Nkrumah who asks us to always listen to the people and organize the struggle around and with them? Who are our allies in this fight? What is our conception of an inclusive Burundian society and how do we craft a vision that addresses its structural problems? And ultimately, whose interests are we defending?

The answers to these questions will undoubtedly allow Burundians to see more clearly and to judge the sincerity of the different factions that currently exist in our society and to assess the merits of each cause. An honest assessment, if that is still possible, will hopefully reveal from among the present actors the lost ghost of the Prince so that Burundians are not and won't be misled by the replicas of the traitors

that he dedicated his life to fight against and ended up paying the ultimate prize.