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A HALF CENTURY OF AGRARIAN CRISIS IN
BURUNDI (1890-1945): THE INCAPACITY OF THE
COLONIAL ADMINISTRATION IN MANAGING THE
AGRARIAN CRISIS OF THE LATE EIGHTEEN-
HUNDREDS

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Introduction

The present day Burundian countryside is essentially composed of a series of new elements that have emerged against the backdrop of the former more or less obsolete agrarian system;¹ indeed, it looks like it did on the eve of colonial intervention.

In order to reconstruct the main stages of agrarian history and to understand the genesis of the current landscape, it is necessary to start with the most recent additions and then go back in time. For example, the artificial afforestation (eucalyptus, pines, cypress) that presently covers numerous crests and mountainsides is recent, as are the exotic trees that farmers have planted on their own landholdings (*grevillea* and eucalyptus in particular). Likewise, the oldest trees on the coffee and tea plantations that are nowadays omnipresent date back to the colonial era, as does the incredibly dense network of rideable roads that lead to them. What would remain of the landscape if one were to ignore the elements that are so present today? The banana groves? After all, how is it possible to imagine Burundi without the banana groves that dominate the current landscape in many areas and represent the pillar of the peasant economy, occupying a privileged place in the Burundian culture (and, one may be tempted to say, traditions)? And yet, with a few rare exceptions (particularly in the warmer regions of the Southeast and the depression of the Tanganyika), Burundian farmers did not cultivate bananas before the twentieth century;² they too are relatively new additions to the countryside. Indeed, to picture pre-colonial Burundian landscape, one must imagine a Burundi without banana trees or the *Xanthosoma*-type taros (*amateke ikisungu*) that grow in their shade and hillsides, without cassava or sweet potatoes; in fact, these crops were only truly cultivated under colonial pressure, as we will see below.

What, then, were the characteristics that distinguished the nineteenth century landscape? And how did the population nourish itself, given that today's diet is based on staples that did not exist then (cassava, sweet potato, taro, banana beer)? Sorghum, maize, eleusine and beans were the main crops and the basis of the daily diet at that time. Other plants were also cultivated, but in small quantities: yams, *Colocasia*-type taro (*amateke ikirundi*), *Vigna*-type beans, Congo peas, voandzou, leaf vegetables, squashes and of course, *ficus* trees that were planted near the family compound. The cultivated plots were generally located around the living compound (*rugo*), usually situated near the hilltops, while the rest of the landscape was predominantly composed of grazing lands occupied by the cattle herds.

But even this pre-colonial agrarian system was also rather recent, given that the presence of the *Phaseolus* bean and maize in pre-colonial plots was itself the result of profound changes; the integration of these crops into production systems was doubtlessly the result of exchanges between the New and Old Worlds. Indeed, an agro-pastoral system based on sorghum and eleusine (finger millet) cultivation in conjunction with bovine rearing has been in place since the first centuries A.D. Livestock essentially served to reproduce soil fertility of cultivated plots, as dung was collected daily from the compound where the animals spent the night. The first major change in this system took place during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries following the widespread adoption of plants of American origin, initially maize and *Phaseolus*-type beans. Their short vegetation cycle (five months for maize and three for beans) enabled farmers to do what would become commonplace in centuries to come: enjoy two harvests per year on the same plot. The practices that led to this important change (efficient exploitation of cow manure for fertilization and an increase in social mechanisms that managed the distribution of dung, for example) and their consequences (increase in labor productivity by twofold, relative food security) permitted sustained demographic growth and contributed to creating the Kingdom of Burundi that colonizers would discover at the end of the nineteenth century.³

But towards the end of the eighteen-hundreds, the development process was brutally interrupted. The country was struck by an agrarian crisis that would last several decades. Only fifty years later, in the late nineteen-forties, would a second series of transformations

take place, enabling the emergence of a new agrarian system and the resolution of the crisis. This article analyzes this crisis, which lasted during most of the period of colonial rule, and the partial responsibility of the colonial administration in its prolongation. In the first section, the author will analyze the crisis itself and its causes. In the second, the different aspects of the agricultural policy implemented by the Belgian tutelage will be reviewed, followed by an examination of price conditions that dictated farmers' entry into the market system and their consequences. The final section will explore the mechanisms that prolonged the crisis beyond what was thought to have been possible, illustrating the weighty role colonial-imposed labor obligations played in its intensification and prolongation.

1. The Agrarian System Crisis

At the end of the nineteenth century, the development process that had overwhelmingly changed the Burundian agrarian system and increased its performance with the introduction and generalization of American plants, was abruptly interrupted. Between 1891 and 1905, the bovine pest, foot and mouth disease and trypanosomiasis led to a drastic decrease in the number of cattle.⁴ The country was struck with a food shortage and famines broke out in the regions most affected. Burundi was thus thrown into an exceptionally grave crisis that lasted until the early nineteen-forties.

It is important to note that this extremely serious crisis at the turn of the century did not affect only Burundi. The bovine pest, smallpox, biting fleas (*chiques*), trypanosomiasis, food shortages and famines were common among all East African populations, starting with the lowland regions in neighboring Tanzania. The bovine pest struck even more broadly, decimating herds from one tip of the continent to the other. That these disasters were so widespread, that they affected the continent almost simultaneously and that the crisis was triggered at the same time Burundi fell to colonial rule has intrigued historians and opened a debate that is far from resolved.

The Crisis as Established in Burundian Historiographical Literature *An epidemiological crisis*

The epidemics first began in Tanzania. Starting in the mid-nineteenth century, commercial caravans from trading posts on the

coasts had begun to venture into the interior of the African continent, apparently spreading the epidemics in their wake much to the detriment of the unimmunized populations, easy prey to the ravages of epidemiological crises.⁵ But the kingdoms of Burundi and Rwanda were not on the commercial circuits and had never been visited by ivory hunters or slaves. Rather, the main trade routes went either south towards Tabora and Ujiji on Lake Tanganyika or north, towards Bukoba on Lake Victoria. It was not until the end of the century—the same time colonizers arrived—that these two kingdoms would confront their own “epidemiological transition.”⁶ Long distance trading no longer appeared to be responsible for spreading sicknesses, rather it was the “colonial shock” itself.

Incidentally, even in Tanzania, where traders of all sorts had treaded for several decades, H. Kjekshus clearly demonstrated that the demographic collapse was directly linked to disturbances resulting from the colonial conquest that had begun in 1890 and not the middle of the nineteenth century as colonial literature notes.⁷ The majority of the germs had been present in the region for a long time,⁸ and their “sudden irruption” was not enough to explain the violence with which the epidemiological crisis struck the countries concerned.

The conquest wars

In Burundi, cognizance missions, military expeditions, commercial caravans and portaging over long distances accelerated the dissemination of illness. While the conquest wars were rather small scale, they nonetheless provoked disturbances via the many “pacification” operations. The German armies maintained a policy of setting lands afire in face of the slightest resistance. Massacres, village fires and decimation of harvests succeeded each other, according to the quarterly chronicles of the Missionaries Society of Africa.⁹ Violence, epidemiological crises and destruction of the ancient order: what was taking place was, in essence, a *slow assassination*, to use the expression of R. Botte.

Taxes, corvée labor and obligatory crop policies did not become widespread until several decades later (1914 for taxation and corvée labor, 1930 for obligatory cropping). Therefore we can conclude that they are not responsible for the end-of-the-century crisis.

Market integration

Some authors point to the early integration of farmers into the market as the cause of the crisis, rather than the colonial invasion or the spread of germs by passing caravans. In certain regions of Tanzania, for example, merchants' demands for foodstuffs pushed farmers to sell the part of their surpluses that until then had been either stocked as insurance against a bad year or redistributed. Several years of this kind of market integration would have weakened these societies to the point of making them particularly vulnerable towards the end of the century.¹⁰ Burundi however saw little of this type of integration before the colonial regime took control. And even after this time, very few food products were produced on the Burundian hillsides, at least until World War I. Nonetheless, the idea that the society had been previously weakened and thus made vulnerable to epidemics does appear accurate. But, as we will see below, our hypothesis is that this weakness was not due to early integration into market exchanges.

An ecological crisis?

With the impressive spread of sleeping sickness, the unprecedented cataclysms that struck this part of the world were considered, prudishly, the result of an "ecological" crisis. Trypanosomiasis was not one of the pests that beset the region at the end of the nineteenth century. Rather, it appeared in Burundi later, some fifteen years after the bovine pest and the smallpox epidemic. J. Ford¹¹ has showed that this delay was not accidental and that the two previous illnesses had favored the explosion of the tse tse fly by provoking an ecological imbalance. The drastic reduction of cattle fifteen years earlier, the increase in overgrowth, the decrease in cultivated lands in many regions and the development of regenerative regrowth contributed to the development of areas particularly favorable to the tse tse fly, thus triggering its proliferation. The development of sleeping sickness was therefore the result of a major environmental modification. Yet, while this process was indeed observed on the Imbo Plain, ecological imbalance does not entirely explain the Burundian crisis.

Other authors speak of prolonged and repetitive draughts during this period. The low levels registered for the Nile attest to these dry

spells. However this hypothesis is debatable, since the level of the Nile is also determined by the Blue Nile, coming from Ethiopia, as well as the White Nile, coming from the Great Lakes region.¹²

The crisis that struck the entire eastern part of the continent is thus complex and multifaceted. Each of the factors mentioned here most certainly played a role. What is problematic is to order their appearance and determine their relative importance. Further, the case of Burundi (and Rwanda) is a bit different. While the other mountainous regions of East Africa were relatively untouched by the crises, or at least much less severely,¹³ the highlands of Burundi and Rwanda did not escape their effects. Are other explanations possible?

Towards an Endogenous Crisis of the Old Agrarian System

Looking back on this problematic period, the rinderpest appears to have played a decisive role. Since bovines were the principal form of capital accumulation for farmers, the pest led to severe decapitalization. Further, as the principle vector of fertilization of arable lands, the disappearance and/or drastic reduction of cow dung resulted in a drop in yields. The other epidemics thus evolved in very conducive conditions because the majority of the population was already badly nourished and had low resistance. This probably explains the intensity of the "microbial reaction," despite the fact that the majority of the germs had been present in the region for many years.¹⁴

Yet, considering the total surface area, plots and pastures needed for a farming family to live (a minimum of roughly twelve hectares),¹⁵ it is possible to estimate that the maximum demographic density authorized by this agrarian system was about 50 inhabitants/km², a ceiling perhaps a bit high if we deduct from the surface area the high altitude forest of *Kibira*, rocky crests, summits and lakes that are not conducive to planting or grazing. And it is precisely the density level that was reached and even exceeded at the end of the nineteenth century. Indeed, as sophisticated as the new agrarian system appeared in comparison to preceding ones, it could not nourish more people. Any additional population growth would necessarily lead to a decrease in cultivated surface area for each family and/or the reduction of grazing lands of which a part would be once again used for cultivation. The author's hypothesis is that the

inevitable erosion of the pasture/fertilized lands ratio brought on widespread overgrazing. The livestock suffered from increasingly poor nourishment and were struck fatally by the pest, the quantity of animal manure decreased, leading to a drop in both productivity and crop yields.

While much more efficient than the system that had preceded it, the two-crop per season agrarian system that was born of the agricultural revolution of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries did not require less space, precisely because of the relationship between livestock rearing and crop cultivation. Indeed, it was the crisis of this very agrarian system, both revealed and triggered by the bovine pest at the end of the century that led to fifty years of hardship and population stagnation until the mid-nineteen-forties. If the hypothesis of generalized overgrazing is the correct one, then the logic underpinning the Burundian agro-pastoral system is definitively condemned to this particular, ancient relationship between agriculture and animal husbandry based on the transfer of fertility. In fact, the new agrarian system that emerges from and enables the resolution of the crisis proves to be less and less dependent on cattle to maintain soil fertility.

While the conquest wars worsened the situation, colonial intervention was not responsible for the profound causes of the crisis or its instigation. However, colonial policy and the unfavorable conditions that forced farmers to become involved in market exchanges did contribute to prolonging the crisis far beyond what would have otherwise been possible. And while the elements of a totally new agrarian system were already falling into place at the turn of the century, the crisis was not truly resolved until the nineteen-fifties.

2. The Colonial Order

Once the pacification period was over and the new authorities established themselves following the German defeat in 1918, the colonial machine gathered strength. Its impact on the Burundian society and economy became decisive. The establishment of an indirect rule¹⁶ system was accompanied by changes to the responsibilities that would fall on farmers. While the old taxation system was no longer in effect, it was still necessary to finance the

Burundian component of the administration, as well as the rest of the colonial structure. The two pillars of the new structure would be a tax on coffee and a system of *corvée* labor.

Per capita tax and coffee

While attempts to cultivate coffee date back to the German period, it was only in the early nineteen-thirties when farmers truly “discovered” the crop. It is known that this “discovery” was incited by the use of the whip as well as the administration’s coffee policy, and at the time it had no other objective than to enable “Valid Adult Men” to pay the obligatory per capita tax.

The new tax, to be paid in cash, compelled farmers to cultivate coffee in order to generate income. Indeed, the annual sale of coffee was the only source of money available to farmers. The problem, though, was that taxes and *corvée* labor were imposed on a population that was just barely getting over a major agrarian crisis and most families had not yet been able to reconstitute their herds to their previous size. In addition, while the pre-colonial tax was applied to each compound, the colonial tax—a per capita tax—applied to every “Valid Adult Man,” and thus could affect several people of the same family.

Given this context, it is not surprising that the development of coffee was rather slow, despite the colonial and “traditional” authorities’ (*chefs* and *sous-chefs* nominated by the tutelage) coercive measures. Significant regional differences appeared during this period and the comparative advantage of the northern regions (Buyenzi) appeared. Those able to mobilize limitless land and labor were able to turn coffee cultivation to their lucrative advantage. This was particularly the case with certain traditional *chefs*, the most famous being Baranyanka (Ngozi territory) who maintained 35 000 coffee trees in 1939.¹⁷ These people alone were committed to expanding their plantations as much as possible. However, with the exception of these few “big planters,” most farmers cultivated the 51 obligatory trees. Some producers living in regions unfriendly to coffee cultivation often maintained fewer and eventually ended up uprooting the trees during the night.

Initially, farmers were encouraged to plant the trees close to the living compound—i.e., either in the recently installed banana grove or

in the area where it would soon expand to—in order to benefit from the dung fertilizer. When mulching coffee trees became obligatory in 1934, the colonial administration began its particularly vigorous and heavy-handed outreach efforts that would mobilize the energy of the entire administration.

In a country where missionaries were committed to fighting the manifestations of ancient traditions like the sorghum seeding rite *muganuro*,¹⁸ coffee interestingly becomes the object of new “pagan rites.” The “Manual for the Small Coffee Grower” was preached from at the end of mass¹⁹ and farmers had to plant an extra coffee tree beyond the 50 mandatory ones, referred to as “the King’s coffee tree.” While the Catholic Church fought against all forms of pagan rites, the administration managed to transfer the sacredness that had once been bestowed on sorghum, to coffee. The fidelity of the subjects to the *chefs* and King was no longer evaluated based on respect for the traditional agricultural calendar; rather, it depended on the number of coffee trees planted and the farmers’ compliance with technical rules and norms.²⁰

Corvée labor and obligatory crops

Obligatory labor in the form of *corvées* was organized in a similar way. Portaging, the construction of roads and buildings needed by the colonial administration and Church, “anti-erosion” tasks and other chores took up an increasing amount of farmers’ time, much to the disadvantage of their own agro-pastoral activities.

Among the *corvée* labor tasks, portage required the most working days particularly during 1927-1928 when food had to be delivered to famine-struck regions not yet accessible by roads (yet to be built). Between 1925 and 1932, millions of workdays were dedicated to building the basic road network.²¹ The work was remunerated, but the time spent walking from the loading point to the finishing point (at times more than 100 kilometers) was not. Recruitment depended on the administration’s needs and did not take into account the demands of the farmers’ work calendar. Thousands of farmers thus found themselves away from home for weeks or even months during the most intense work periods of the year.²²

In addition to these mandatory but “paid” tasks there were numerous unpaid chores. Unpaid, because they were done “in the

interest of the indigenous communities." These tasks included setting the course for secondary roads, planting coffee, anti-erosion work, reforestation, drainage of peaty marshes and compulsory planting of crops. Let us briefly examine this final point.

The colonial authorities were convinced that the recurrent food shortages and famines were due to the "laziness of the indigenous people" and the seasonal nature of the main food crops (grains and pulses). Therefore, cultivation of food crops became mandatory. Cassava and sweet potato, considered anti-famine crops because they could be cultivated outside of the traditional climatic calendar and stayed in the ground for a relatively long period of time, were made obligatory in 1926. Each "Valid Adult Man" had to plant five ares, then, in 1931 fifteen ares, of which ten or more had to be cassava.²³

These two crops were thus introduced into the Burundian agrarian system during this period. Unlike maize and *Phaseolus*-beans, cassava and sweet potato were not immediately adopted by farmers when they were first introduced. While at the turn of the century they were cultivated somewhat in the warmer regions (the Imbo Plain and the lower, warmer hillsides of Mumirwa and Kumoso), they remained unexploited if not unknown in the central regions.

The eventual widespread cultivation of cassava and sweet potato is generally attributed to the mandatory "anti-famine" crop policy, at least this is what is stated in most publications concerning the colonial period and reiterated more recently in the literature regarding the role of roots and tubers in the region's agriculture. The effectiveness of these crops in resolving the hunger problem is not questioned,²⁴ nor the agronomic arguments used by the colonial authorities to justify their generalization. Indeed if the widespread adoption of these crops by farmers was hindered at times due to the "ill will" of the farmers, one need not look further than "cultural" obstacles and a few cases of poisoning by hydro cyanic acid for the cause.

Usually based on bibliographic research from the colonial archives and the "Dossiers Agricoles," these interpretations generally echo the colonizers' own belief that their actions were necessarily beneficial.²⁵ Even if coercive methods used by the colonizers are condemned (particularly the systematic use of whip), the soundness of the "technical package" is not questioned. Yet, when one talks to those who experienced the mandatory crop policy,²⁶ and takes the time

to reconstitute the different elements of family production units and operating modalities, the true impact of the policy appears quite different. Its effectiveness in fighting famine was very limited, in a direct sense by the inferior crop yields and indirectly by the effects that the consequent labor-drain had on family farms.

Those who remember this period have emphasized in particular the inferior crop yields.²⁷ Given the conditions, low yields were not surprising: plots were situated on cattle paths, often far from the living compound; cultivation was carried out as a "community unit" under the command of the *chef* and *sous-chef*, usually the main users of the grazing lands; and the imposed work calendar did not respect the other obligations of the farmers. Moreover, as Philippe Leurquin noted in 1960, the 15 tons of fresh cassava produced every three years offered only half the price a bean/sorghum cultivation could garner, as well as far fewer calories.²⁸

Today cassava and sweet potato are among the most widely cultivated crops in Burundi, except in the high altitude regions where cassava cannot grow. There is no doubt that the two crops are very much integrated into the farmers' cropping and production systems. However, the impressive dissemination of the plants and the role they now play in the diet are not due to the mandatory food crop policy. With the exception of the lowlands, farmers did not truly appropriate these crops until after the policy was repealed (in the nineteen-fifties). Once given the liberty to cultivate on their own plots (and not on common grazing lands more or less controlled by the *sous-chef*) what and how they wanted, the Burundians effectively integrated cassava and sweet potato into their preexisting cropping systems.

Parallel to the inferior crop yields, the labor-drain that resulted from the mandatory crop policy further limited its effects. All of the tasks, paid or unpaid, resulted in a massive misappropriation of the labor force at high opportunity costs to the farmers, despite the colonial prejudices regarding their laziness. The colonial theory to "put to work" farmers was in fact based on two fundamental principles. The first, "the natural indolence of Negroes," was purely racist and requires no comment. The second was based on the idea that farmers produced only the strict minimum necessary for their survival and no surplus.²⁹ It was thus necessary to encourage them to produce more by increasing their needs (taxes, market demands) through propaganda and corporal punishment (the whip). This theory

took hold. Now formulated in a politically correct way, it underlies the discussions and policies of the contemporary period. Today, the "under-employed work factor" is used to justify "community development works" as well as agricultural techniques that require more work for farmers. And, with their integration into the market system, today more than ever farmers are incited to produce more.

3. The evolution of prices penalizes taxpayers

During the nineteen-twenties in Burundi, as in most African countries, the rise in national prices was greater than the inflation experienced in international markets. The incredible increases in local prices for beans, goats and cows were far beyond those for imports, as Figure 1 demonstrates. Farmers who were able to sell their goods thus could access imported products. In particular, one observes the substitution of cotton for the traditional clothing made of ficus bark, as well as the widespread appearance of industrial hoes in the countryside starting in 1925. However, few people were able to take advantage of these relatively favorable conditions. In practice, only the animal skins found buyers in the urban market, and it is unlikely that very many farmers were able to supply this demand after more than two decades of profound crisis and decapitalization.

For the first period analyzed in Figure 1 (1920-1945), one can observe that the sale of even a small amount of beans, maize or coffee was enough to enable the Burundian farmer to pay his taxes, provided they were relatively modest.

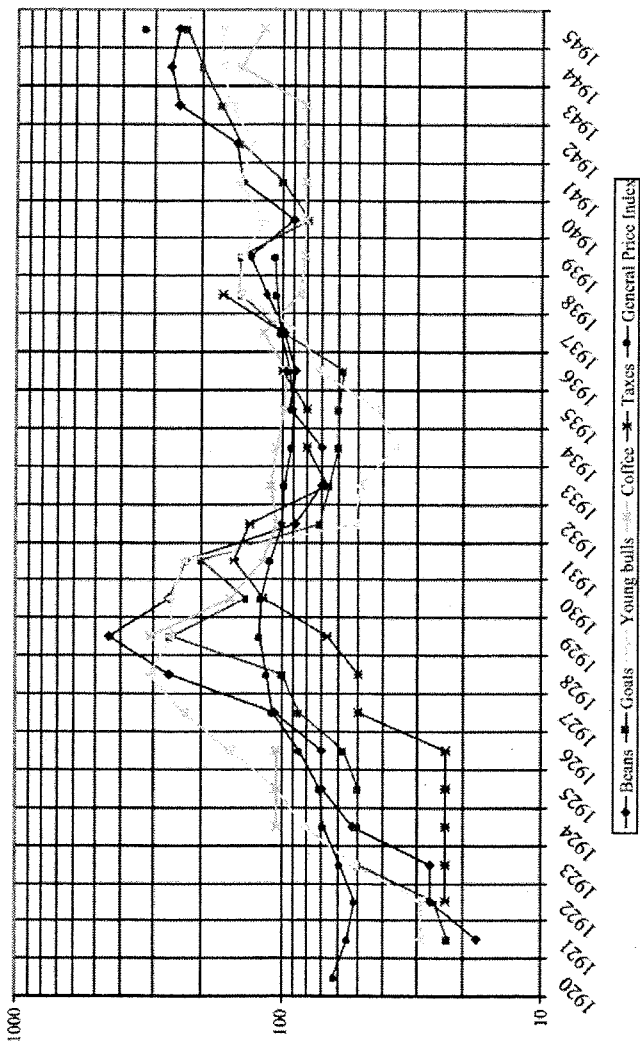


Figure 1: Evolution of prices from 1920 to 1945
 Comparison of the evolution of the prices (in current Burundian francs) for beans, goats, young bulls (butchered meat), parchment coffee, per capita tax (in the interior of the country) and the General Prices Index of Brussels (index 100 for 1936-38).

Source: H. Cochet, based on the data compiled by P. Leurquin for the prices of beans, goats, young bulls and the Index of General Prices of Belgium; by A. Hatungimana for coffee; and by J. Gahama for the per capita tax.³⁰

Farmers were not truly integrated into the market system until the nineteen-thirties when coffee cultivation became widespread and the number of effective taxpayers (those that actually paid) increased.³¹ This integration took place in a context in which prices were increasingly unfavorable, while at the same time fiscal pressure was increasing (Fig. 2). In the early nineteen-thirties, the rather quick drop in foodstuff prices that followed the 1929 crisis (worsened even more so by the drop in local prices in Belgium) provoked the massive return of ficus-based fabrics and locally-made hoes.³² With regard to the drastic drop in bovine prices in the early nineteen-thirties, the decrease was not a reflection of an abundance of herds but rather due to the fact that farmers could no longer wait for the animal to be sold in hopes of reconstituting their herd or expanding the one they already had, and thus sold immature animals at lower prices (Fig.1).

Later, when a significant fraction of farmers finally had something to sell - coffee - the prices for the product became less and less favorable. Even in the mid-nineteen-thirties when most agricultural prices began to go up again, that of coffee remained depressed, its index staying lower than other foodstuffs until the nineteen-fifties (Fig.1).

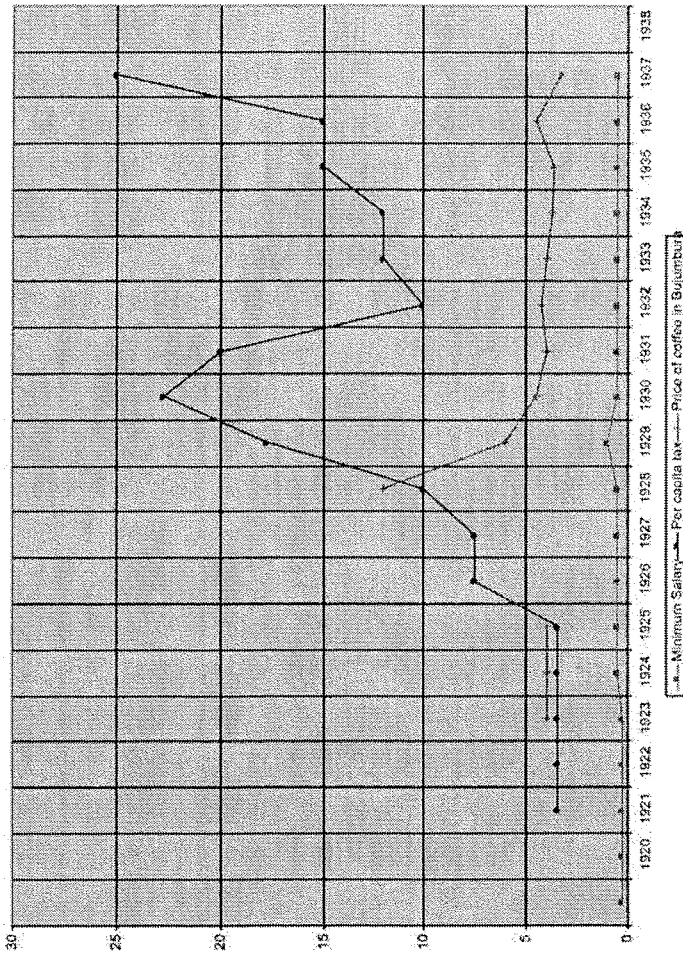


Figure 2: Comparative evolution of the per capita tax, the price of parchment coffee in Bujumbura, and the minimum salary paid in the Burundian interior 1920-1938. (In current Burundian francs)

Source: H. Cochet, based on data compiled by A. Hatungimana for coffee, J. Gahama for the per capita tax, and D. Nsavyiman for the minimum salary.³³ The price of coffee is for parchment coffee from Bujumbura. The price paid to the producer was less.

As the figure illustrates, the per capita tax rose significantly (to be lowered a few years later) at the very moment prices collapsed. In the late nineteen-twenties, one kilo of parchment coffee would have been enough to honor one's tax payment while ten times more was necessary by the late nineteen-thirties, i.e. a great deal more than what could be produced on the individual farmer's three-acre plantation. Similarly, the sale of a dozen kilos of beans was enough to earn the necessary revenue to pay taxes in the late nineteen-forties; 40-50 kilos were necessary ten years later. Further, the money that was earned daily selling one's labor by participating in portage tasks or road construction would eventually amount to very little. It would become necessary to work 80 days on the site in order to be able to pay one's taxes in 1938.

As a result, integration into the market took place under terrible conditions for Burundian farmers. Thus, it is not surprising that, in the course of the numerous revolts that mark this period, the main agents of this forced integration were particularly targeted. By violently rejecting the most visible economic manifestations of the new colonial order, currency and taxes at first, and later imported goods like textiles and industrial hoes, the protesters rejected the vectors that were forcing their integration into market exchanges. In 1922, two million two-cent coins were introduced into the countryside. Much to the regret of the colonial authorities, they immediately disappeared; the populations preferred to melt down the coins to make copper bracelets. In fact, it was the best usage one could make of them, since they served only to pay taxes.³⁴

4. The Deepening of the Agrarian Crisis

The severe crisis that hit Burundi in 1890 dragged on. Ultimately, two generations were raised in the worst conditions the country had seen for many years. The "civilizing" actions of the new colonial power were not sufficient to overcome the crisis, to say the least. Clearly certain measures adopted by the tutelage administration (vaccination campaigns, for example) helped control epidemics. But, despite numerous efforts to keep food shortages in check (planting of mandatory crops, grain stockage, collective grain-stores managed by the *chefs* and *sous-chefs* and supplied through a sort of "forced savings" mechanism, obligatory decreases in livestock herds), famine

continued to ravage the Burundian countryside from time to time until the mid-nineteen-forties.³⁵ Suddenly interrupted at the end of the nineteenth century, demographic growth stagnated due to the tax of human lives taken away after each food crisis. Recovery was slow; despite the brief respites, the recurring crises made it difficult for growth to gather momentum.³⁶

The Manori famine: 1943 - 1944

Fifteen years after the mandatory "anti-famine" crop policy had been implemented, the Manori famine broke out,³⁷ serving as a reminder of the ineffectiveness of the administration's measures. As usual, the cause of the famine was attributed to drought and phytosanitary accidents,³⁸ thereby justifying the further pursuit of the mandatory crop policy. However, it must be recognized that the climatic factors were not responsible for much; J. E. Bidou has shown that the variations in the volume of rain were moderate and "do not appear to be decisive in explaining the frequency of famines in certain regions of Burundi."³⁹ The year 1943 was indeed dry, but "the drought was not widespread in 1943 or 1944. With the exception of the plains of Ruzizi, no other region experienced a lack of rain for two consecutive years... Even in 1943, one can observe a rather imperfect relationship between the spread of the drought and that of the famine. Certain areas like the Bututsi region were affected by the famine although the weather had been favorable. And while there is a coincidence between the two phenomena in Mugamba, other regions that had been abnormally dry did not suffer the worst of the food shortages, or even did not suffer at all, like in Kirimiro..."⁴⁰

The famine was nonetheless very real, even if its most serious effects were only felt in a handful of regions, principally Bututsi and Mugamba as well as, to a lesser extent in the north of Buyenzi, Bugesera, the east of Bweru and the southwest of Buyogoma.⁴¹ In analyzing the demographic hemorrhaging of this period, it is difficult to know who died and who fled only to return several years later when normalcy returned. It is for this reason that P. Gourou notes 30,000 people died of hunger during these two years in Ruanda-Urundi, while C. Thibon suggests much higher figures.⁴²

As the final "bump" in the turn-of-the-century agrarian crisis, the Manori famine illustrates the country's slide into a cycle of food

shortage and famines and the apparent inability of colonial authorities to create the conditions necessary for the emergence of a new, more effective agrarian system capable of feeding more people.

Massive emigration towards the British territories

While poorer families experienced rapid pauperization, selling their last cows in order to honor tax payments that revenues from coffee cultivations could not cover, hordes of Burundians fled to Tanzania and Uganda, searching for paid work in order to pay off their taxes and amass a small sum for eventual needs (cotton goods, for example), or simply to avoid the corporal punishment inflicted on defaulters.

A first wave left around 1923-24, shortly after the abolition of colonial duties in Buganda and at the time of the mandatory crops decree in Ruanda-Urundi.⁴³ The emigration intensified during the famine of 1928-29. During the nineteen-thirties, the phenomenon became large-scale, due to mounting fiscal pressure and increasing *corvée* labor. The exodus only ceased around the late nineteen-forties.⁴⁴

In the most affected regions, the flight of men in their prime increased the work burden on those who stayed behind.⁴⁵ The fieldwork became the responsibility of the women. In most cases, the surface area cultivated decreased.

Conclusion

Ultimately, it was not the increase in financial burdens that handicapped farmers: the per capita tax was little more than the former tax paid to the royal court and the princes.⁴⁶ Rather, it was the unprecedented mobilization of the work force that was so detrimental. On the one hand, the increase of monetary "needs" (taxes, but also cotton goods [clothes made of *ficus* were prohibited in 1934], tillage implements, traditional obligations of farmers towards the *chefs* and *sous-chefs*) forced farmers to dedicate more and more time to coffee and to sell their labor to the colonizers, and on the other hand, the multiplication of obligatory duties led to massive labor drainage from the family landholding.

This is particularly true during the nineteen-twenties and nineteen-thirties. While traditional taxes paid to the *chef* (maintained

due to the indigenous component of indirect rule) represented 37 work days per "Valid Adult Man" in 1928 (reduced to 15 days after the colonial authorities lowered the payment), obligatory tasks could amount to a total of 48 days per "Valid Adult Man" during the same period.⁴⁷ And although the portage duties and road construction decreased considerably in the early nineteen-thirties, *corvée* labor actually intensified during this same decade. Coffee campaigns, reforestation, marsh drainage, construction of secondary roads, anti-erosion measures and mandatory crop cultivation took up an increasing amount of the farmer's time. But no matter: "150 days is enough to work one hectare; a household can easily cultivate 1.5 hectares and still have time left over," reads one colonial report from 1930.⁴⁸ Father Shultz, in counting his congregation in 1933 proves to be more lucid: of the 507 Valid Adult Men in one sub-chieftdom located in his mission area, 265 had left for Uganda, either sick or old (or working fulltime for the mission or administration). Of the remaining 242, 140 were requisitioned every day for duties! He concluded that "of the 204 Valid Adult Men that lived near the mission, 1375 were requisitioned or kept from their landholdings on a daily basis and yet another food shortage would not be surprising."⁴⁹ The war effort during the early nineteen-forties increased the burden on farmers, thus worsening the food situation and leading to the Manori famine.⁵⁰

Finally, for many rural families, the colonial intervention resulted in further decapitalizing their herds, a process that had started at the turn of the century. The few livestock remaining were bargained off in order to pay taxes. For those lucky enough to have maintained a few animals, reconstituting the herd to a significant size was impossible; the population's animal husbandry practices were considered unproductive, and the colonial administration pushed farmers to sell off at very low prices what were considered to be "culled cows" in an effort to "eliminate the excess animals." By increasing the tax on cattle and, above all, setting up livestock markets, the authorities pushed people to sell their animals at very low prices.

Thirty years after it had begun, it was surprising to observe the continuation and deepening of the agrarian crisis during the nineteen-twenties and nineteen-thirties. And yet the elements of a new agrarian system were, at that very time, slowly falling into place (particularly the cultivation of bananas) in the majority of the central

regions of the country. This new system would eventually, in the nineteen-fifties, enable the country to surmount the crisis.¹ It appears as if—and this is the author's hypothesis—the colonial pressure during the nineteen-twenties and nineteen-thirties halted the construction of this new system by brutally robbing it of the farmers' labor. The first agrarian crisis was endogenous and was not caused by the colonial invasion. However, its exceptional duration, its prolongation, and the time necessary to surmount it (two generations) were directly the fruit of the colonizers "works."

Notes

¹The agrarian system concept is fundamental to the comparative agricultural approach used here. By enabling an understanding of the state, functioning, and conditions of a society's agriculture sector at a given moment in history, the concept of agrarian system involves exploring both the operating and reproduction modes of one or several ecosystems, the social relationships of production and exchange that have contributed to the sector's creation and development, and the economic and social conditions of the ensemble, particularly the relative pricing system that establishes the modalities for integration into the international markets. H. Cochet, *Crises et Révolutions agricoles au Burundi* (Paris, 2001). A notion first developed by French geographers in a rather restrictive sense, very much centered on "agrarian structures" and their spatial expression in the agrarian landscape, the concept was initially defined as "an operating mode, historically elaborated and sustainable, adapted to bioclimatic conditions in a given space, and responsive to the conditions and social needs of the moment." M. Mazoyer, *Dynamique des systèmes agraires*, Summary Report presented to the Committee on Agrarian Systems, Ministry of Research and Technology (Paris, November 1987), 6.

² This question has been discussed in H. Cochet, *Crises*.

³ It is not possible to analyse here this process nor the hypotheses that underlie it. For a more detailed examination, the reader is referred to the following article that addresses this question specifically: H. Cochet, "Quelques questions sur l'origine et la différenciation d'un système agricole," *African Economic History* 26 (1998), 15-62.

⁴C. Thibon, "Crise démographique et mise en dépendance au Burundi et dans la région des grands lacs 1880-1910," *Cahiers d'histoire, n°2 CH - N°4 CRA*, Université du Burundi/CRA Université de Paris I. III.V (Bujumbura, 1984), 19-40; R. Botte, "Rwanda and Burundi, 1889-1930: chronology of a slow assassination," Part 1, *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 18, 1 (1985), 53-91. The older works [H. Meyer, *Les Barundi, une étude ethnologique en Afrique orientale* (1916), critiqued and annotated by J. P. Chrétien, Société Française d'Histoire d'Outre-Mer (Paris, 1984); G. de Greef, "Monographie agricole de la région de l'Urundi," in *Bulletin Agricole du Congo Belge* 10, 1-4 (1919), 2-71] attribute the 55-65% decrease in herds to the rinderpest [50 à 90%, according to T. Nsabimana, *Food production history in Burundi: 1880-1945*

(Madison, 1988)]. Added to this are the subsequent losses (starting in 1905) caused by sleeping sickness, estimated to be extremely high in warm regions.

⁵G.W. Hartwig, "Social consequences of epibiotic diseases: the nineteenth century in Eastern Africa," in G.W. Hartwig and K.D. Patterson, eds., *Diseases in African History, an Introductory Survey and Case Studies* (Durham, NC, 1978), 25-45; J.P. Chrétien, "Démographie et écologie en Afrique Orientale à la fin du XIX^e siècle: une crise exceptionnelle?" *Cahiers d'Etudes africaines* 105-106, XXVII-1-2 (1987), 43-59; J. Koponen, *People and production in late precolonial Tanzania, History and Structures*, Monographs of the Finnish Society for Development Studies No. 2, Transactions of the Finnish Anthropological Society No 23, *Studia Historica* 28, Finland (1988).

⁶C. Thibon, "Un siècle de croissance démographique au Burundi (1850-1985)," *Cahiers d'Etudes africaines*, 105-106, XXVII-1-2 (1987), 61-81; C. Thibon, "Croissance et régimes démographiques anciens (Burundi, Rwanda et leurs marges 1800/1950)," in *Histoire sociale de l'Afrique de l'Est (XIX^e-XX^e siècle)*, Actes du Colloque de Bujumbura (17-24 October 1989), (Paris, 1991), 207-229; and R. Botte, "Rwanda and Burundi."

⁷Thus reinforcing the negative vision of the pre-colonial period in order to facilitate the argument that the pax britannica led to more "civilized" times. See H. Kjekshus, *Ecology control and Economic Developments in East African History: The Case of Tanganyika, 1850-1950* (London, 1977).

⁸G.W. Hartwig, "Social consequences;" R. Botte, "Rwanda and Burundi;" and J.P. Chrétien, "Démographie et écologie."

⁹Documentation examined with care by R. Botte, "Rwanda and Burundi."

¹⁰See for example J. Giblin who wrote about the famine of 1894-1896 in Tanzania: "...because this famine broke out in a society where redistribution relationships had been severely disrupted and where many individuals had lost access to food reserves, the famine caused depopulation, emigration, dispersal and eventually erosion of human control over vegetation communities and disease environments." J. Giblin, "Famine and social change during the transition to colonial rule in northern Tanzania. 1880-1896," *African Economic History* 15 (1986), 101. See also J. Koponen, *People and Production*.

¹¹J. Ford, *The Role of the Trypanosomiases in African Ecology. A Study of the Tsetse Fly Problem* (Oxford, 1971). The responsibility of ecological imbalance in the spread of sleeping sickness is demonstrated in all of East Africa. See H. Kjekshus, *Ecology Control and Economic Developments*.

¹²J.E. Bidou, "Les variations du climat au Burundi depuis le début du XX^e siècle: le point de vue d'un géographe," *Cahiers d'Histoire* IV and V (Bujumbura, 1988), 10-20.

¹³The interpretations of the crisis and its severity depend on how the authors characterize agriculture and pre-colonial animal husbandry. Regarding the case of the Tanzanian mountains, see J. P. Raison, "Originalité et diversité des massifs montagneux tanzaniens," in J.P. Raison, ed., *Essais sur les montagnes de Tanzanie*, Karthala-IFRA-Géotropiques, Paris, 1997, 5-32.

¹⁴G.W. Hartwig, "Social consequences."

¹⁵A hectare of corn+beans/sorghum that is continually planted and fertilized with dung, a hectare of eleusine alternatively left fallow for several years, an area of

grazing lands large enough to be able to feed all year long the livestock necessary for maintaining the fertility of the doubled cropped corn+beans/sorghum plots. H. Cochet, "Quelques Questions."

¹⁶ The Belgian authorities chose to apply to Ruanda-Urundi the principle of indirect rule. Instead of wiping out the ancient forms of societal organization and power, the colonizers preferred to maintain the "traditional" institutions, i.e., the royalty, doubling them, in a way, with a parallel colonial administration that would work "in collaboration" with the traditional institutions.

¹⁷ J. Gahama, *Le Burundi sous administration belge* (Paris, 1983).

¹⁸ *Muganuro*, the sorghum seeding rite, served as a national festival in ancient Burundi. Celebrated in the last week of December and preceded by a strict ban concerning the seeding of sorghum, the rite sanctified the new agricultural calendar that emerged from the agrarian changes of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries which enabled the intensification of the production system (two crop cycles per year).

¹⁹ The participation of the clergy in the popularization of coffee cultivation was also motivated by the transfereer of state subsidies to missionary schools, a transfer that depended on this participation. A. Hatungimana, "La caféiculture au Burundi: économie et société des débuts à l'Indépendance (1920-1962)," Ph.D. dissertation, Université de Paris I Panthéon-Sorbonne (1999), 175.

²⁰ H. Cochet and B. Ndarishikanye, "La production caféière au Burundi : agronomie, vulgarisation et rapports sociaux," *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 34, 2 (2000), 218-248.

²¹ J. Gahama, *Le Burundi*; D. Nsavyimana, "La mobilisation de la force de travail au Burundi sous le mandat belge (1920-1940)," Ph.D. dissertation, Université Catholique de Louvain, Belgium (1989).

²² E. De Selliers de Moranville, "Du portage dans le Ruanda et l'Urundi, projet de supprimer le portage par l'introduction de l'animal de bât," *Bulletin Agricole du Congo Belge* 21, 2 (1930), 519-528. This Capitain-Artillary Commander showed lucidity regarding the exorbitant opportunity cost for the labor force and proposed to introduce and develop pack animals (imported from Ethiopia) to replace human portaging. His proposal was apparently ignored.

²³ J. Gahama, *Le Burundi*.

²⁴ See for example J. Gahama, *Le Burundi*; N. Nyandwi, "Encadrement agricole et stratégies paysannes, 'les enjeux de la modernisation rurale' au Burundi," Ph.D. dissertation, Université de Lille III (1991); A. Delor-Vandueren, *Démographie, agriculture et environnement, Le cas du Burundi* (Louvain, 1988); A. Hatungimana, "La caféiculture au Burundi." See also René Dumont for whom the "laxism in discipline during the last war ...by coinciding with badly distributed rains [provokes] a new famine in 1943." R. Dumont, "Décolonisation et développement agricole au Centre-Est de l'Afrique: Le Rwanda-Urundi," *Revue Tiers-Monde* 1, 4 (1960), 427.

²⁵ Or at best, offer at times diverging points of view of the territorial administrator, the report's author, and the Resident, situated at the hierarchical summit and the person who received the report, as Bugwabari points out. N. Bugwabari, "L'intérêt historique des dossiers agricoles: l'exemple des années 1930," *Cahiers d'Histoire* IV and V (Bujumbura, 1988), 29-37.

²⁶ The majority of the material collected during the author's fieldwork comes from the many interviews that were conducted with farmers, particularly old farmers, between 1990 and 1995 in the context of a research project on dynamics of agrarian systems in Burundi, coordinated by the author (UNDP/ISMEA/FSEA project).

²⁷ See the results of fieldwork conducted by L. Kavakure, "Famines et Disettes au Burundi (fin XIX^e - i^{ère} moitié XX^e)," Master's thesis, Université du Burundi (1982); G. Le Jeune and G. Ntazokura, "Famine et disette au Buhumuza ancien," *Culture et Société, Revue de Civilisation Burundaise* 4 (1981), 82-102; and those carried out within the study program on the agrarian dynamics in Burundi, coordinated by the author from 1990 to 1995.

²⁸ P. Leurquin, *Le niveau de vie des populations rurales du Ruanda-Urundi* (Louvain and Paris, 1960). See also P. Ndimanya, who estimates that the mandatory cultivation of one are of cassava leads to a decrease of three times the amount of sorghum, if one considers the work time dedicated to planting both crops. P. Ndimanya, "Diagnostic agricole du Bweru, Région naturelle du Nord-Est du Burundi," Master's thesis, Institut National Agronomique Paris-Grignon, Paris, 1992.

²⁹ A well-known argument regarding Burundi developed by the economist Philippe Leurquin, who wrote in 1960: "By organizing his production, the peasant sought but one result: to assure, in every case, the minimum amount of food necessary. Surplus is nothing more than a waste of energy." Leurquin, *Le niveau*, 28.

³⁰ Leurquin, *Le niveau*; A. Hatungimana, "La caféiculture." For the per capita tax: 1922-1929: per capita tax for all taxpayers (except the Imbo Plains and surrounding agglomerations); 1930-1938: per capita tax in the Muramvya territory, representative of the per capita tax in most of Burundi's "interior" (Muravya, Ngozi, Kitega and Bururi territories). The tax was higher in the Imbo Plains, the Rumonge-Nyanza region and the Mumirwa hillsides, and lower in the Southeast (Rutana and Ruyigi territories). J. Gahama, *Le Burundi*, 334.

³¹ When the government successfully pressured the *chefs* to increase the number of "effective" taxpayers. J. P. Chrétien, "Une révolte en 1934, les racines traditionalistes de l'hostilité à la colonisation", *Annale ESC*, 1970, 6, 1678-1717.

³² P. Leurquin, *Le niveau*, 103-104.

³³ A Hatungimana, "La caféiculture;" J. Gahama, *Le Burundi*; D. Nsavymana, "La mobilization."

³⁴ P. Leurquin, *Le niveau*.

³⁵ For more information on the repeated food shortages and famines during the nineteen-twenties and nineteen-thirties, see the resumé in C. Thibon, *Recherche en histoire rurale. Sociétés rurales en modernisation. Pyrénées XIX^e siècle, Burundi XX^e siècle. Une histoire sociale du politique. Tome 1: Synthèse Burundi: Croissance, transition démographique et crises socio-politiques au Burundi 1880/1993, Une population prise au piège d'une fatalité ou de dérives socio-démographiques modernes* (Pau, 1999), 46-62.

³⁶ "...à défaut de sources quantifiables centrales, il nous est difficile de mesurer l'ampleur autant des ponctions des années 1920 que de l'érosion des années 1930, encore plus d'arrêter un taux quelconque. Aussi sommes-nous tentés de nous arrêter aux images de ruptures régionales, d'un total négatif et d'une dégradation/stagnation pour respectivement les décennies 1920 puis 1930." C. Thibon, *Recherche en histoire rurale*, 62.

³⁷ Manori, the last famine of the century (1943-1944), was particularly severe in Mugamba and Bututsi, as well as in the Northeastern peripheral regions (Bugesera, East of Bweru) and the Southwest of Buyogoma, although to a lesser extent.

³⁸ Including in certain recent publications such as D. Nyambariza, "Les efforts de guerre et la famine de 1943-1944 au Burundi, d'après les archives territoriales en Territoire de Bururi," *Cahiers d'histoire*, n°2 CH - N°4 CRA, Université du Burundi/CRA Université de Paris I.III.V (Bujumbura, 1984), 1-18.

³⁹ J. E. Bidou, "Les variations," 14-15.

⁴⁰ G. Feltz and J.E. Bidou, "La famine Manori au Burundi 1943-1944," *Revue Française d'histoire d'outre-mer* 81, 304 (1994), 281, 283.

⁴¹ See the "geography of the famine" presented by G. Feltz and J. E. Bidou, "La famine," 298; and C. Thibon, *Recherche en histoire rurale*, 89.

⁴² P. Gourou, *La densité de la population au Ruanda-Urundi. Esquisse d'une étude géographique* (Brussels, 1953), 135; C. Thibon, "Un siècle de croissance," 76; idem, "Croissance et régimes," 214. See also a discussion of the figures by G. Feltz and J. E. Bidou, "La famine," 269-272; and the resumé presented by C. Thibon, *Recherche en histoire rurale*, 82-126.

⁴³ J.P. Chrétien and E. Mworoha, "Les migrations du XX^e siècle en Afrique Orientale, le cas de l'émigration des Banyarwanda et des Burundi vers l'Uganda," *Les migrations internationales de la fin du XVIII^e siècle à nos jours* (Paris, 1980), 643-680; text reedited in J. P. Chrétien, *Burundi, l'histoire retrouvée, 25 ans de métier d'historien en Afrique* (Paris, 1993), 275-310.

⁴⁴ J.P. Chrétien, *Burundi, l'histoire retrouvée*, 279.

⁴⁵ Chrétien, *Burundi, l'histoire retrouvée*, 296.

⁴⁶ The equivalent of 40 to 50 kg of beans per "Valid Adult Man" at the end of the nineteen-thirties versus 100 kg of sorghum per household during the precolonial period.

⁴⁷ Chrétien, *Burundi, l'histoire retrouvée*, 295.

⁴⁸ Written by Voisin, cited in T. Nsabimana, *Food production history*, 166.

⁴⁹ Chrétien, *Burundi, l'histoire retrouvée*, 296-297.

⁵⁰ C. Thibon, *Recherche en histoire rurale*, 115-120.

⁵¹ H. Cochet, *Crises*.