



Integrating spiritual and cultural traditions for sustainable peacebuilding in Burundi

Burundi Policy Brief

Acknowledgements

This study was made possible through the generous support of the British Academy, with funding administered by the University of Leeds, United Kingdom. We extend our sincere gratitude to our UK-based research team: Professor Emma Tomalin, International Team Leader and Project Coordinator, for her outstanding leadership; and Co-Investigators.

Dr. Kathryn Kraft and Dr. Jennifer Philippa Eggert for their invaluable expertise and guidance throughout the project implementation. Special appreciation goes to Oscar Davies for his exceptional administrative support in coordinating weekly project meetings and effectively disseminating research findings through a series of webinars. Further, our project partners – Islamic Relief Worldwide and the Network of Religious and Traditional Peacemakers – played an essential role in advising on the research design and recruiting local faith actors to participate in the project.

We are equally grateful to our international research counterparts for their insightful collaboration: Professor Jayeel Cornelio, Robbin Dagle, and Septrin Calamba in the Philippines; and Professor Kalinga Tudor Silva and Ms. Fathima Afra in Sri Lanka. The intellectual exchange with these colleagues significantly enriched our work.

Our deepest appreciation goes to all the participants in Burundi who generously contributed their time, knowledge, and personal experiences to make this research possible. Your willingness to share has been fundamental to the success of this study. We also acknowledge with profound gratitude the immeasurable contribution of World Vision Burundi, particularly for providing the expertise of Mr. Albert Nduwimana, whose skilled facilitation of the Do No Harm and Empowered World View workshops complemented and strengthened this research initiative.

This research represents the collective effort of all these individuals and institutions, and we are truly grateful for each contribution that made this work possible.

We thank our colleague and friend Alvin Andanje for his design of the Hidden Peacebuilders logo.

To cite this work:

Mbazumutima, T. and Ndayikeza, C. (2025) Integrating Spiritual and Cultural Traditions for Sustainable Peacebuilding in Burundi: Burundi Policy Brief. Hidden Peacebuilders Network.

Executive Summary

Burundi's peacebuilding landscape is shaped by both modern religious institutions and traditional religious and cultural practices. Since independence in 1962, the country has experienced recurring cycles of violence, often linked to ethnicity, poverty, political power and access to resources. Although the Arusha Peace Agreement brought periods of relative calm, Burundi remains fragile, with ongoing economic and human rights challenges. In this context, peacebuilding must reflect the full range of ways communities understand, manage and resolve conflict.

This policy brief draws on a project carried out by the Hidden Peacebuilders Network, funded by the British Academy, and on discussions from a stakeholder workshop held in Gitega in December 2024. The project worked with 17 local faith actors in Burundi to understand their distinctive contributions to peacebuilding. Participants in the stakeholder workshop highlighted that peacebuilding often privileges Christian and Muslim leaders while overlooking traditional practitioners, despite the fact that many Burundians still turn to ancestral practices during family and community conflicts.

Four practices were identified as especially relevant: Kubandwa, a ritual of spiritual possession that can enforce moral discipline; Kuraguza, consultation with a diviner, which can explain misfortune but may also fuel accusation; Kuroga, the use of evil spells, often linked to revenge and mistrust; and Gupfumura, a healing practice intended to address sickness caused by spells and restore calm. These practices can either build peace or intensify conflict, depending on how they are used.

The brief recommends recognising traditional specialists, documenting constructive rituals, addressing harmful uses of traditional practices, expanding interfaith and healing initiatives, and creating dialogue between religious leaders and traditional practitioners. A more effective peacebuilding approach in Burundi should not treat modern religion and traditional spirituality as separate systems, but should encourage them to work together carefully, respectfully and without causing harm.

1. Introduction



Since gaining independence from Belgium in 1962, Burundi has experienced recurring cycles of violence, primarily between the majority Hutu and minority Tutsi populations. These cycles are often presented as a battle for power and resources. However, scholars such as Hatungimana (2011) argue that poverty, rather than ethnicity alone, has been the main cause of conflict. Despite periods of relative calm following the Arusha Peace Agreement of 2000, brokered by Nelson Mandela, Burundi remains fragile, facing continuing humanitarian protection concerns alongside severe economic challenges (UNHCR, 2023; World Bank, 2023). Within this turbulent context, religion has played a dual role. While some churches have been accused of complicity in violence within the Great Lakes region, including Burundi, others have served as mediators and places of sanctuary.

Christianity is the dominant religion in Burundi, with Roman Catholics accounting for around 62% of the population and Protestants a further 22% (U.S. Department of State, 2017). Religious leaders have also played an important role in reconciliation through interfaith dialogue and trauma-healing initiatives (Iyamuremye, 2021). Despite this strong adherence to monotheistic religions, it must be noted that there still exist traditional religious and cultural practices that continue to be performed, such as Ukubandwa, Kuraguza, Gupfumura, and Kuroga. Although discouraged by monotheistic religions,

¹ <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/projects/building-community-resilience-peace-and-reconciliation-as-a-response-to-global-disorder-the-tangible-and-intangible-aspects-of-local-faith-actors-contributions/> In addition to Burundi, the project also ran in the Philippines and Sri Lanka. Partners included: the Universities of Leeds and East London (UK), and Ateneo de Manila University (Philippines); World Vision International, Islamic Relief Worldwide, the Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities, and the Network of Religious and Traditional Peacemakers; as well as local NGOs, including Rema Burundi.

these practices have been recognized as contributing either to building peace or to disturbing peace within communities. Thus, this policy brief aims to rethink the strategy for involving faith actors in peacebuilding in a way that is adapted for Burundian realities. It emerges from a research project funded by the British Academy in the UK, which involved partnerships between academics, faith actors, and practitioners and ran from 2023 to 2025. The project is an initiative of the Hidden Peacebuilders Network, which aims to elevate the voices of local faith actors (LFAs) involved in peacebuilding and to better understand the distinctive contributions of their work. In Burundi, this involved close partnerships with 17 LFAs. This policy brief draws mostly from discussions and concerns that were raised at the final stakeholder workshop, held in Gitega in December 2024.

2. Problem statement

Peacebuilding in Burundi is a multi-actor process, but peacebuilders in Burundi often overlook the role that some traditional practices play in maintaining peace and social cohesion. When faith leaders are involved in peacebuilding, Christian and Muslim leaders are usually seen as the most reliable actors, while traditional practitioners are often ignored. Christians and Muslims draw on teachings from the Bible and the Qur'an to promote peace in line with their beliefs. However, when problems and conflicts arise within families, some people in Burundi still turn to ancestral practices to resolve them. They perform rituals such as Ukubandwa, Kuraguza, Gupfumura, and Kuroga. Although these practices are often discouraged by Christianity and Islam, they remain important to some people in cases of conflict. In Burundi, these practices are understood as having the potential either to build peace or to create further tensions within communities.

Yet, despite their important role in shaping peace and conflict at the community level, the people who hold knowledge of these practices are often not invited to contribute to peacebuilding. Peacebuilding in Burundi therefore needs to recognise the full range of ways in which people seek to resolve conflict, including traditional practices. Those responsible for peacebuilding should understand that the Burundian context is not only shaped by Christian and Muslim religious leaders, but by community practices. These practices include ancestral approaches to resolving conflict that are overseen and sustained by traditional practitioners.



3. Analysis and evidence

This policy brief highlights how traditional Burundian religious and cultural practices can either build peace or create conflict through the performance of rituals. During the Hidden Peacebuilders Network stakeholder workshop, participants talked about forgotten practices that can help build peace in Burundi.

They mentioned four traditional religious and cultural practices:

Kubandwa:

This is a ritual of spiritual possession. It enforces moral discipline. People who break ethical rules risk supernatural consequences. This ritual keeps order in the community: “if respected, Kubandwa builds peace by discouraging harmful behaviour”.

Kuraguza:

This means going to a diviner. The diviner explains strange events that bring bad or good luck to people: “a dishonest diviner might falsely blame someone, which fuels conflict and disturbs peace”.

Kuroga:

This means casting evil spells. These spells bring supernatural sickness or bad luck: “people who feel wronged sometimes use kuroga as revenge. This can destroy trust and escalate violence”.

Gupfumura:

This means calling on spirits to heal people who are sick because of evil spells: “a healer who performs gupfumura can end a cycle of suspicion by curing the sick person and identifying the source of the spell. This restores calm. But if the healer names the wrong person as the sorcerer, it can start a new conflict.”

Participants at the stakeholder workshop believed that the traditional custodians of these practices, such as diviners, traditional healers who use mystical powers and people who cast spells (commonly called Abarozi), are very important for peacebuilding. However, they are usually forgotten or ignored by peacebuilding communities operating in Burundi. These actors can either work to build or disturb peace if they are not considered at the community level. As one participant said during the workshop: "Traditional healers and diviners get involved in many community conflicts. They can prevent them or make them worse. But they have no space to express their powers."

The most prevalent method of involving local faith-based peacebuilding actors is mainly through mobilising 'modern religions'. Research by Iyamuremye (2021) shows that interfaith dialogues and trauma-healing prayers led by religious leaders have already contributed to reconciliation. However, challenges remain. For example, Longman (1998) notes that churches in the Great Lakes region have sometimes aligned with oppressive regimes, which undermined their moral credibility. Additionally, these Western religious-based peacebuilding programs often entirely overlook the role of ancestral beliefs and practices. Yet crucially, many Burundians view these beliefs as important for building or disturbing peace in their communities. Our research findings suggest that peacebuilding must strike a balance between using religious practices and traditional spiritual systems while also preventing their misuse for political ends.

4. Policy options and recommendations



An effective way to bring peace to communities in Burundi is to respect the roles played by both traditional spiritual systems and modern religious institutions. Both have helped to bring people together, and they should work alongside one another to avoid causing harm. The policy options and recommendations that emerged from the Hidden Peacebuilders project are outlined below.

4.1 Building on the positive attributes of traditional beliefs, rituals and practitioners

Traditional practices are very helpful in bringing peace to the community. If we support and guide them, they can help to create harmony.

Here are some things that peacebuilding actors can do:

- **Recognize traditional specialists**, like diviners, healers, and Abarozi, as people who can help bring peace. They are already trusted by the community to help resolve conflicts, so recognizing them and giving them support can only make the community's social cohesion much stronger.
- **Support keeping rituals alive that build and sustain peace**, such as Kubandwa and Gupfumura. These rituals have been shown to help restore calm and rebuild trust in the community. This can be done by researching and documenting good practices from these rituals, which can be capitalized upon in peacebuilding.
- **Remain cautious about the problems that may arise from some traditional practices**, such as Kuraguza or Kuroga. Sometimes, these practices can cause misunderstandings or false accusations, which can disrupt the peace in the community.

- **Research traditional peacebuilding rituals that have been forgotten.** Many older people in the community remember practices that were once widely used to help prevent revenge and violence. If we can gather this knowledge and respect old beliefs, we can restore valuable tools for resolving conflicts without violence.

4.2. Making modern religious institutions stronger in their peacebuilding role

Modern religious communities have already done a lot to help to bring people together especially through interfaith dialogues and prayers for healing as documented by Iyamuremye (2021). To build on these peacebuilders can:

- **Expand interfaith and healing initiatives,** making sure that they include all members of the community.
- **Encourage institutions to reflect on their own practices,** making sure they are being fair and impartial. Sometimes churches in the Great Lakes region have had problems with being too closely tied to regional and national politics and thus are not known as good contributors to peacebuilding (Longman, 2004).
- **Bridge the gap between religious and traditional systems.** Many people in Burundi draw guidance from both. Sometimes peacebuilding programs forget about ancestral beliefs. We should encourage dialogue and joint activities between religious leaders and traditional practitioners, as fundamentally, they share the goal of wanting to help the community.

Conclusion

Peacebuilding in Burundi has made some progress, in part due to the work of modern religious institutions. At this time, we must remember that traditional spiritual practitioners such as diviners and healers have not received the recognition they deserve within peacebuilding programs. Instead, they remain on the sidelines but are still very involved in helping to resolve conflicts in their communities in more informal ways. This policy brief argues that while faith-based organizations have made great progress in building peace in Burundi, there is now a real chance to build an approach to peacebuilding that, in including traditional practitioners, is more representative of Burundian society. Indeed, many in the community turn to practitioners in times of crisis or conflict. At present, we do not have a full understanding of how these practitioners can help to promote peace. We need to learn more about their roles and how their work fits into peacebuilding efforts in Burundi. We also need to be respectful and open to their ideas. It is vital to understand that traditional practitioners are not separate from the community, but a part of it.

If we include peacebuilders and modern religious leaders in these efforts, we can build a stronger peace process in Burundi. These relationships must be built on mutual respect. Crucially, we also must ensure no one is hurt by bad practices. If we do this, we can build a peace process that is truly a part of Burundi's spiritual community. This approach does not privilege one practice above any others. Rather, it asks everyone to work for the good of the community. Peacebuilding in Burundi needs people such as traditional practitioners and modern religious institutions to work together. There is a real opportunity for Burundi to build a more sustainable peace process if traditional peacebuilders and modern religious leaders work together.

References

Ali, T. M. and Matthews, R. O. (eds.) (2004) *Durable Peace: Challenges for Peacebuilding in Africa*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Gaynor, N. (2021) 'Borders and violence in Burundi: Regional responses, global responsibilities', in *Handbook on Human Security, Borders and Migration*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, pp. 300–311.

Hatungimana, J. (2011) *The Cause of Conflict in Burundi*. Bachelor's thesis. Dalarna University. Available at: <https://du.diva-portal.org/smash/record.jsf?pid=diva2%3A519100> (Accessed: 23 July 2026).

Iyamuremye, I. (2021) 'The role of the church and Christians in bringing peace and reconciliation in contemporary Burundi', *ShahidiHub International Journal of Theology & Religious Studies*, 1(2), pp. 87–102.

Longman, T. (1998) 'Empowering the Weak and Protecting the Powerful: The Contradictory Nature of Churches in Central Africa', *African Studies Review*, 41(1), pp. 49–72.

UNHCR. (2023) *Burundi Operational Update*. Geneva: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Available at: [UNHCR](#) (Accessed: 23 July 2026).

U.S. Department of State. (2017) *2017 Report on International Religious Freedom: Burundi*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of State. Available at: [2017 Report on International Religious Freedom: Burundi](#) (Accessed: 23 July 2026).

Wagner, M. D. (2021) 'Kiranga, the cult of', in Mudimbe, V. Y. and Kavwahirehi, K. (eds.) *Encyclopedia of African Religions and Philosophy*. Cham: Springer.

World Bank. (2023) *Burundi: Greater Macroeconomic Stability and Reforms in the Trade and Agriculture Sectors Can Boost Economic Growth*. Washington, DC: World Bank. Available at: [World Bank](#) (Accessed: 23 July 2025).

Integrating spiritual and cultural traditions for sustainable peacebuilding in Burundi

Burundi Policy Brief