

Belgian priest's book exposes previously hidden facts about missionaries in Rwanda

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The Belgian author Father Minnaert shows some contents of his book on Rwandan history, launched last week in Kigali. (Sam Ngendahimana)

A Belgian priest, Stefaan Minnaert, 65, has published a book with damning details on the history and deeds of missionaries in Rwanda.

It also exposes documents related to the missionary work in Rwanda and the socio-economic and political aspects of Rwanda of the time that had been kept under lock and key for decades.

The aim of the book, Fr Minnaert says, is to expose the truth around the history of Rwanda by revealing what missionaries did in the country yet had remained concealed for long.

He hopes his work will help Rwandans and others better understand the country's history and the dynamics that shaped it.

The book, titled "Histoire de l'Évangélisation du Rwanda, Recueil d'Articles et de Documents," is a

collection of articles and documents concerning former missionaries, including Cardinal Lavigerie, Mgr Hirth, le Dr Kandt, Le Père Brard, le Père Classe, le Père Loupias, and Mgr Perraudin, as well as a famous Rwandan chief Rukara, among others.

Rukara was the head of four army divisions (Abakemba, Uruyenzi, Abemeranzigwe and Urukandagira) during the reign of King Yuhi V Musinga between 1895 and 1931.

Rukara hailed from Northern Province's Burera District.

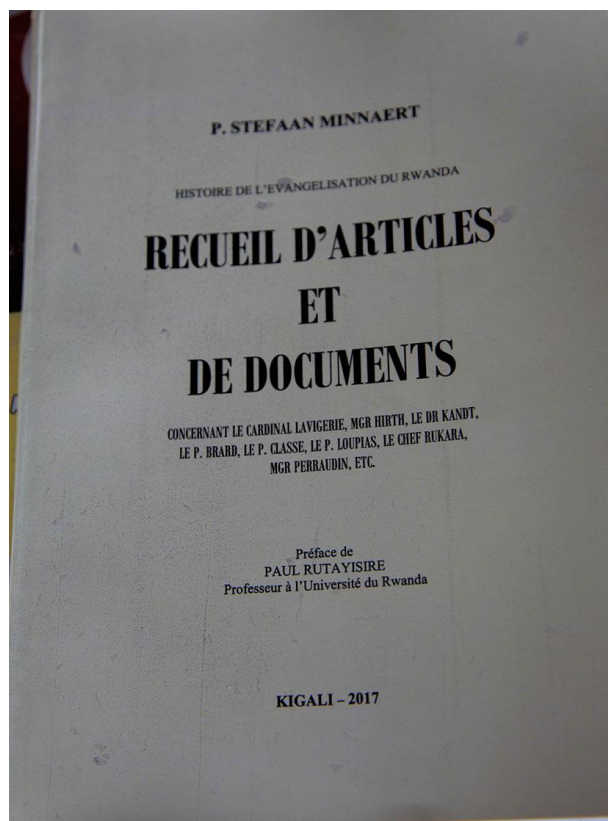
The documents in the book show that missionaries and western colonisers and missionaries worked hand in hand for the colonisation to be successful.

Speaking during the launch of the book in Kigali on Friday, Prof. Paul Rutayisire, a historian at University of Rwanda who wrote the foreword in the book, said it will help researchers interested in the country's history to carry out research that's based on reliable information.

The book documents examples of 'serious mistakes' made by the missionaries and behaviours that characterised them yet they went against evangelical ideals and attracted public disapprovals.

The book exposes military expeditions organised by White Fathers against Rwandans at Rwaza [parish – in Burera District] when they resisted (religious) conversion and hard labour in 1904. It also carries an article on Father Loupias, who was killed by members of Rukara's family. The article, under the headline, 'Father Loupias, victim of murder or imprudence?' exposes facts which were kept out of the reach of Rwandans for long.

It shows how missionaries started their (evange-



Father Stefaan Minnaert's book cover. / Sam Ngen-dahimana

lical) mission from converting children and orphans as well as women, who were a vulnerable group, to Christianity.

Minnaert said that the colonisers brought another way of thinking, another way of life, another way of administration, destroying the ones they found in Rwanda (and had been practised for centuries).

Prof. Gamaliel Mbonimana, a historian, said the missionaries and colonisers also destroyed Rwandans' culture and identity, including the edifices in which they gave tribute to their ancestors, for instance, citing a girl who was a fervent (converted) Catholic Christian who was several times told by a priest to burn 'Kimezamiryango' (an edifice in which a Rwanda family would convene to remember their de-

ceased ancestors).

The book says the history of Rwanda was manipulated in the interest of the colonisers and missionaries, with view to justifying colonisation.

"Rwanda's history needs revisiting, there is need to refer to archived documents (files) and compare them with the accounts or narratives from the elders so as to bring about a comprehensive picture of what really happened in the past," the Belgian author said.

Rwanda's history has been characterised by oral tradition whereby history was verbally handed down from father to child, from generation to generation, by word of mouth. The keeping and transmission of history via books came with the arrival of missionaries and colonialists in the 1900s.

As a result, some facts about Rwanda in the past had risks of disappearing whenever the older people died.

Rwandan historian Tom Ndahiro lauded the author for demystifying the missionaries and wondered whether the documents that Monsignor Perraudin reportedly stole so that what the missionaries did should not be known, will be exposed as well.

The 332-page book, which examined the 1900-1916 period when German colonisers were in Rwanda, was printed in Kigali in 2017.

About the author

Fr. Stefaan Minnaert first reached in Rwanda in 1981 serving as a White Father at various Parishes.

In 1999, White Fathers requested him to prepare a booklet for 100-year (diamond) jubilee of the Catholic Church in Rwanda (from 1900 to 2000). It is then that he went to Rome and published his first book, "Save - 1900 : Fondation de la Première Communauté Chrétienne au Rwanda (Save - 1900 : Foundation of the First Christian Community in Rwanda).

From 2006 through 2009, he was archivist of White fathers in Rome, Italy. Since 2009, Minnaert has been a diocesan priest at Saint Martin Parish in Ronse-Renaix in Belgium.

In Kigali, Stefaan Minnaert's book can be found at Caritas library and Ikirezi library.

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