

# Examples of Christian Contextualization in Rwanda

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Among the cultural practices of Rwanda, there are several that can be useful to missionaries introducing the gospel. They can create a connection between local culture and the gospel. However, instead of adapting these common practices in Rwanda, some missionaries in the past branded them devilish and lost valuable opportunities to connect with the local people.

## Introduction

Understanding a culture facilitates the delivery of the gospel by making connections between what people know and what one desires them to understand. The etymology of “the English word ‘culture’ comes from the German *Kultur*, meaning to develop or grow.”<sup>1</sup> Disconnecting people from their culture, therefore, may cause personal growth to stagnate and the meaning of new information will be difficult to comprehend. The importance of contextualization in mission must not be undermined, because “culture is a ‘performance’ of one’s ultimate beliefs and values, a concrete way of ‘staging’ one’s religion.”<sup>2</sup> Contextualization is thus “the core idea...of taking the gospel to a new context and finding appropriate ways to communicate it.”<sup>3</sup> Jesus exemplified contextualization of the gospel by leaving His culture and joined another culture for the purpose of communicating the gospel. “[T]he way of Jesus is...to honor a people’s culture and its incorporated worldview. He entered cultural life of the Jews in order to communicate with them, so we are to enter the cultural matrix of the people we seek to win.”<sup>4</sup>

## Contextualization in Rwanda

*Kunywana*<sup>5</sup> is a traditional practice which is meant to seal friendship by way of blood. Failing to recognize this practice, missionaries missed an opportunity to move from the known to the unknown; thus, they discouraged a practice which would have been useful to illustrate a believer’s relationship with Christ. By failing to appreciate this practice, they missed a great opportunity of relevance to the biblical covenant with the blood of Jesus as in Romans 5:8-10.

*Gutsinda*<sup>6</sup> is another manifestation of the “culture of respect in Rwanda where no one would attempt to mention the name of the father-in-law or mother-in-law.”<sup>7</sup> Kamugisha, a nun who grew up in cultural traditions, but who spent time in mission afterwards, declared that, “no Rwandan would swear in the name of God...it started with the priests to swear in the name of God, where now it is done in every minor thing whether true or false.”<sup>8</sup> When contextualized, it is not far from “You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain” (Exodus 20:7).

*Kubandwa*<sup>9</sup> is another tradition that Kamugisha explained, “as the way of worshiping God in Rwanda”<sup>10</sup> a philosophy in which “the initiates desired protection against illness, sterility, and the harmful influence of the dead.”<sup>11</sup> Here the missionaries can commend the people for their respect to the supernatural, and introduce them to the living God who is above Ryangombe.

## God as a Potter

The Rwandese view God as a potter who shapes children in the mother’s womb. They also link creation with water as demonstrated by some traditions whereby Banyarwanda women of child-bearing age are careful to leave water ready, before they go to bed, so that God may use it to create children for them.<sup>12</sup> Viewing God as a potter provides an opportunity to introduce the biblical teaching about God as the creator (Genesis 2:7, 21-23; Isaiah 64:8).

## Respecting *Indaro*

An *indaro* is a small hut “consecrated to the spirits”<sup>13</sup> or the supernatural. As narrated by one elder in the community, “if a person would run for the safety of his life and entered that *indaro*, no one would follow him there. Even when hunters chased an animal and it entered that hut, no one would dare kill it.”<sup>14</sup> The philosophy behind it is that the person or animal has sought refuge with the supernatural. This concept could be linked to the biblical idea of cities of refuge in Numbers 35:11-15. For the missionaries, this concept can work as a tool to teach their converts how to respect the place of worship as the abode of the God of heaven.

Hiebert contends that “the heart of mission has always been—and remains—the task of bridging the gulf between the gospel and the world.”<sup>15</sup> Rwandan culture seems to provide numerous opportunities for contextualization with biblical teachings.

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## NOTES

1. Brian M. Howell and Jenell Williams Paris, *Introducing Cultural Anthropology: A Christian Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 27.
2. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge, *God and Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993), 2.
3. A. Scott Moreau, Gary R. Corwin, and Cary B. McGee, *Introducing World Missions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015), 16.
4. Charles H. Kraft, *Issues in Contextualization* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2016), 17.
5. *Lexique Pro Kinyarwanda English Dictionary* (Kigali, Rwanda: Iriza-Starter, 2006).
6. Tereza Kamugisha, *Ubunyarwanda n'Ubukristu Ubukristu n'Ubunyarwanda* (Kigali: Pallotti-Press, 2014), 33.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. *Lexique Pro Kinyarwanda English Dictionary* (Iriza-Starter, 2006).

10. Tereza Kamugisha, *Ubunyarwanda n'Ubukristu Ubukristu nUbunyarwanda* (Kigali: Pallotti-Press,2014), 31.
  11. Célestin Kanimba Misago, *Rwanda its Cultural Heritage: Past and Present* (Butare, Rwanda: Institute of National Museums of Rwanda, 2008), 86.
  12. J. S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Nairobi: Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication Data, 1989), 39.
  13. Célestin Kanimba Misago, *Rwanda its Cultural Heritage. Past and Present* (Butare, Rwanda: Institute of National Museums of Rwanda, 2008), 77.
  14. Ezra Mpyisi, retired Seventh-day Adventist pastor, interview by author, Kigali, July 23, 2015.
  15. Paul G. Hiebert, *The Gospel in Human Contexts, Anthropological Explorations for Contemporary Missions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 179.
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