



# EXPEDITIONARY CULTURE **FIELD GUIDE**

**Rwanda**



# About this Guide

This guide is designed to prepare you to deploy to culturally complex environments and achieve mission objectives. The fundamental information contained within will help you understand the cultural dimension of your assigned location and gain skills necessary for success.

The guide consists of two parts:

Part 1 introduces “Culture General,” the foundational knowledge you need to operate effectively in any global environment.

Part 2 presents “Culture Specific” Rwanda, focusing on unique cultural features of Rwandan society and is designed to complement other pre-deployment training. It applies culture-general concepts to help increase your knowledge of your assigned deployment location.

For further information, visit the Air Force Culture and Language Center (AFCLC) website at [www.airuniversity.af.edu/AFCLC/](http://www.airuniversity.af.edu/AFCLC/) or contact AFCLC’s Region Team at [AFCLC.Region@us.af.mil](mailto:AFCLC.Region@us.af.mil).

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# PART 1 – CULTURE GENERAL

## What is Culture?

Fundamental to all aspects of human existence, culture shapes the way humans view life and functions as a tool we use to adapt to our social and physical environments. A culture is the sum of all of the beliefs, values, behaviors, and symbols that have meaning for a society. All human beings have culture, and individuals within a culture share a general set of beliefs and values.



Members of a culture also usually assign the same meanings to the symbols in that culture. A symbol is when one thing – an image, word, object, idea, or story – represents another thing. For example, the American flag is a physical and visual

symbol of a core American value – freedom. At the same time, the story of George Washington admitting to having chopped down a cherry tree is also symbolic, representing the importance Americans place on personal honesty and leadership integrity.

## Force Multiplier

The military services have learned through experience the importance of understanding other cultures. Unlike the 20th-century bipolar world order that dominated US strategy for nearly half a century, today the US military is operating in what we classify as asymmetric or irregular conflict zones where the notion of cross-cultural interactions is on the leading edge of our engagement strategies.

We have come to view the people themselves, rather than the political system or physical environment, as the decisive feature in conflict areas. Our primary objective hinges on influencing constructive change through peaceful means where possible. We achieve this endeavor by encouraging local nationals to focus on developing stable political, social, and

economic institutions that reflect their cultural beliefs and traditions.

Therefore, understanding the basic concepts of culture serves as a force multiplier. Achieving an awareness and respect of a society's values and beliefs enables deploying forces to build relationships with people from other cultures, positively influence their actions, and ultimately achieve mission success.

### **Cultural Domains**

Culture is not just represented by the beliefs we carry internally, but also by our behaviors and by the systems members of a culture create to organize their lives. These systems, such as political or educational institutions, help us to live in a manner that is appropriate to our culture and encourages us to perpetuate that culture into the future.

We can organize these behaviors and systems into categories – what the Air Force refers to as “cultural domains” – in order to better understand the primary values and characteristics of a society. A cross-culturally competent military member can use these domains – which include kinship, language and communication, and social and political systems among others (see chart on next page) – as tools for understanding and adapting to any culture. For example, by understanding the ways different cultures define family or kinship, a deployed military member can more effectively interact with members of that culture.

### **Social Behaviors Across Cultures**

While humankind shares basic behaviors, various groups enact or even group those behaviors differently across cultural boundaries. For example, all societies obtain food for survival, although agrarian societies generally produce their own food for limited consumption using very basic techniques.

Conversely, industrialized nations have more sophisticated market economies, producing foodstuffs for



universal consumption. Likewise, all cultures value history and tradition, although they represent these concepts through a variety of unique forms of symbolism. While the dominant world religions share the belief in one God, their worship practices vary with their traditional historical development. Similarly, in many kin-based cultures where familial bonds are foundational to social identity, it is customary for family or friends to serve as godparents, while for other societies this practice is nearly non-existent.

## Worldview

One of our basic human behaviors is the tendency to classify others as similar or different according to our cultural standard.



As depicted in the chart below, we can apply the 12 cultural domains to help us compare similarities and differences across cultures. We evaluate others' behavior to determine if they are "people like me" or "people not like me." Consequently, we assume that individuals falling into the "like me" category share our perspectives and values.

# 12 Domains of Culture



This collective perspective forms our worldview – how we see the world and understand our place in it. Your worldview functions as a lens through which you see and understand the world. It helps you to interpret your experiences and the values and behaviors of other people that you encounter. Consider your worldview as a way of framing behavior, providing an accountability standard for our actions and a logical explanation of why we individually or collectively act in a certain manner.

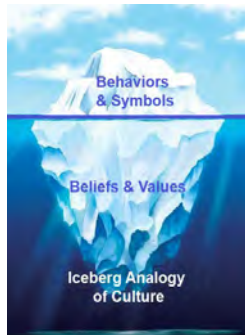
### Cultural Belief System

An important component of a worldview is our belief system. A community's belief system sets its universal standards of what is good and bad, defines right and wrong behavior, and assigns a value of meaningful or meaningless. Our beliefs form the fundamental values we hold to be true – regardless of whether there is physical evidence to support these ideas. Beliefs are a central facet of human culture. They are shared views about world order and how the universe was physically and socially constructed.

While all people have beliefs, their specific components tend to vary depending upon respective world views. What people classify as good or bad, right or wrong depends on our deeply-held beliefs we started developing early in life that have help shape our characters. Likewise, these values are ingrained in our personalities and shape our behavior patterns and our self-identities. Because cultural beliefs are intensely held, they are difficult, though not impossible, to change.

### Core Beliefs

Core beliefs shape and influence certain behaviors and also serve to rationalize those behaviors. Therefore, knowledge of individual or group beliefs can be useful in comprehending or making sense of their activities. We will use the iceberg model for classifying culture to illustrate two levels of meaning, as depicted. Beliefs and values, portrayed by the



deeper and greater level of the submerged iceberg, are seldom visible, but are indicated / hinted at / referenced by our behaviors and symbols (top level). It is important to recognize, though, that the parts of culture that are not visible (under the waterline) are informing and shaping what is being made visible (above the waterline).

In many cases, different worldviews may present behaviors that are contrary to our own beliefs, particularly in many regions where US forces deploy. Your ability to suspend judgment in order to understand another perspective is essential to establishing relationships with your host-nation counterparts. The ability to withhold your opinion and strive to understand a culture from a member of that culture's perspective is known as cultural relativism. It often involves taking an alternate perspective when interpreting others' behaviors and is critical to your ability to achieve mission success.

As you travel throughout the African Continent, you will encounter cultural patterns of meaning that are common among most African countries. What follows is a general description of 12 cultural domains which are used to frame those commonalities.

## CULTURAL DOMAINS

### 1. History and Myth

History and myth are related concepts. History is a record of the past that is based on verifiable facts and events. Myth can act as a type of historical record, although it is usually a story which members of a culture use to explain community origins or important events that are not verifiable or which occurred prior to written language.



Africa has a history that spans the entire existence of humankind. In ancient times prior to the emergence of written languages, history and

wisdom were preserved across generations and ethnic boundaries through oral folk legends or myths. Most early human evolution began as hunting and gathering cultures in East and South Africa, with countries such as Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania, and South Africa renowned for their early human sites. In the last several millennia, the development of agriculture and pastoralism (animal herding) replaced hunting and gathering lifestyles.

Ancient civilizations evolved in all corners of Africa, inspired in part by peoples from the Middle East bringing trade, beliefs, customs, language, and on occasion, colonization. Far from being isolated empires, the African civilizations were intimately connected by commerce and marriage throughout various regions of the continent, and when confronted by outsiders, managed to adapt to their influences. Eventually, Arab traders introduced Islam to Africa and also instituted the Trans-Saharan African slave trade that lasted from the 7th to 19th Centuries.

The “golden age” of European exploration, which lasted from the 18th to mid-20th century, prompted the wholesale exploitation of Africans resources – first human assets through slavery, followed by natural resources such as minerals, precious gems and metals, and wildlife, thereby diminishing most of what was traditional and African.



The introduction of the European Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade altered the slave trade through both the sheer number of Africans enslaved and through the cementing of a racist ideology of Black inferiority to legitimize the institution of slavery. Slavery decimated the African continent for over 400 years through the forced relocation of an estimated 25 to 30 million Africans worldwide. This figure does not include those Africans who died aboard ships or during capture. While abolition of the slave trade dissolved the institution of slavery, it



did not end the European presence on the African continent nor did it drastically alter their attitudes towards Africans.

Starting in the mid-19th century, European colonialism served to redefine African ethnic relations on a large scale; however, as African societies began to resist colonial rule and seek their independence, widespread ethnic conflict and genocide occurred. Sustained westernization and globalization continue to shape the continent through poverty, disease, and social reform. A history still to be recorded, Africa's future identity faces many challenges in critical areas such as environmental change, ethnic strife, women's health and security, and education.

## 2. Political and Social Relations

Political relations are the ways in which members of a community organize leadership, power, and authority. Social relations are all of the ways in which individuals are linked to others in their community.

Traditional African political organizations in the form of bands, tribes, and chiefdoms have existed for several millennia and continue to influence contemporary African governments. Uncommon in modern society, bands are limited to hunting and gathering economies, such as the !Kung of the southern African Kalahari Desert and foragers of central African forests.



Tribes are still represented today across the African political landscape, although the use of the word "tribe" is sometimes misinterpreted due to its western notion of "primitiveness" and oftentimes substituted with the term "ethnic group." Lacking centralized authority, tribes are organized around segmented descent groups or in some cases age groups.

Everyday governance is discharged through councils of respected elders and sanctioned through ritual and other means. East African pastoralist groups such as the Maasai,

along with some West African tribes and the Berbers in North Africa, represent this type of organization.

Chiefdoms or kingdoms are ruled by kings or queens from a royal clan and generally incorporate millions of subjects. Kingdoms such as the Zulu or Swazi in southern Africa developed through conquest, while others like Ghana's Ashante developed through an association of related traditional states. However, colonialism eventually diluted the power and reach of these empires, whose leaders were often retained as indirect rulers or figureheads.



Today, all three of these political organizations still exist, although in the confines of modern African nation-states created by colonial powers who had little regard or understanding of African cultures. This juxtaposition of modernity with tradition has caused severe conflict throughout the continent.

Challenged to construct their respective “national” identities, regional leaders attempt to do so by diluting the traditionally cohesive power of ancestry. These national ruling elites, who derive their power from wealth and commerce rather than tribal affiliation, feel threatened by loyalty to these traditional organizations, labeling their rule as “tribalism.”

This “class versus descent” scrimmage for power has resulted in conflicts across the continent and a dramatic divergence of interests. As a means to overcome these and other issues on the continent, a 55-nation federation, the African Union (AU), was formed in 2002. AU's charter is to promote “greater unity and solidarity between African countries and peoples” by building partnerships in all segments of “civil society.”

### 3. Religion and Spirituality

Religion is a cultural belief system that provides meaning to members of a community. Religious and spiritual beliefs help preserve the social order by defining proper behavior. They also create social unity by defining shared identity, offer

individuals peace of mind, and explain the causes of events in a society. Prior to the arrival of Islam and Christianity, the African continent consisted of orally transmitted indigenous religious practices. As in many societies, African indigenous beliefs influenced diet, subsistence patterns, family structures,



marriage practices, and healing and burial processes. In essence, Africans constructed their worldview through their indigenous religions.

Today, the African continent is primarily either Muslim or Christian. Other faiths such as Judaism and

Hinduism exist as pockets in different regions of the continent, primarily in urban areas. The historical trajectories of Islamic and Christian expansion in Africa offer intriguing commonalities in how Africans across the continent initially reacted to the introduction of each of those religions. For example, it is common throughout the continent to find a blending of many elements of indigenous religious practices with local Islam and Christianity.

Consequently, many African native religions share similarities with religions such as Christianity, Islam, and Judaism in their understanding of God as the creator and ruler of all life, although He is considered untouchable by humans.

However, unlike Christianity and Islam, many African indigenous religions believe that God is not directly involved in people's lives. To them there is a spirit world populated with former good and bad human beings. The good spirits intercede with God on behalf of their living families to whom they then relay God's will through dreams and acquired possessions. The bad spirits work to bring misfortune through sickness,



death, or natural disasters to those who behave inappropriately.

Many indigenous African religions revere "nature" spirits living in the sky, water, and forests. These impersonal spirits help protect people from harm and provide them with life's essential ingredients such as water, sun, and wildlife. This belief system is commonly referred to as animism.

Just as spirits mediate relations between God and humans, religious specialists act as mediators between spirits and humans to provide protection from harm.

#### 4. Family and Kinship

The domain of family and kinship refers to groups of people related through blood ties, marriage, or through strong emotional bonds that influence them to treat each other like family members (often called "fictive kin"). The traditional African family with respect to marriage, family structure, and descent is a much different arrangement than is found in most American families. Likewise, there are several components of the traditional African family that are common to all African cultures.



First, perhaps the most difficult feature to reconcile to Americans is that of polygyny – the practice of a husband having more than one wife. A benefit of this arrangement is that it promotes societal alliances through marriage, procreation, and family wealth through female labor.

Second, due to polygyny, the family in most African cultures has historically consisted of an expanded set of kin or relatives that extends well beyond the American notion of a nuclear family. This arrangement created a family environment where children considered all siblings as "brothers and sisters" and all of the wives/mothers as "mother."

Third, the extended African family traces descent through either the male or female side of the family, a practice which differs considerably from the American family. Patrilineal descent (through the male side of the family) is the more common approach and usually features polygyny. The matrilineal (through the female bloodline) marriage pattern is more uncommon and almost always features monogamy – it is rare to encounter a wife having more than one husband.

Lastly, it is common for two or more blood lines (lineages) to share a common ancestor and collectively form a clan, which is the largest social unit. Clans do not have formal leaders or organizational structures. Membership is transferred from father to child and cuts across ethnic and social boundaries.

The dramatic social changes in Africa during and after colonialism in the last 4 decades have obviously affected the traditional family, and variations on these 3 features can be found across the continent.

## 5. Sex and Gender

Sex refers to the biological/reproductive differences between males and females, while gender is a more flexible concept that refers to a culture's categorizing of masculine and feminine behaviors, symbols, and social roles. Gender roles in Africa follow no single model nor is there a generalized concept of sex and common standard of sexual behavior.

Prehistorically, gender role differentiation in Africa's hunting and gathering cultures was based on a division of labor featuring different, yet complementary, sets of responsibilities for males and females, adults and children. Females gathered



over half the caloric needs from natural vegetation, while also reproducing and raising offspring. Males were primarily hunters but also assisted with gathering.

These gender patterns continued as agricultural practices advanced.

Females shared in farming while continuing to provide for the family's subsistence, and males produced the cash crops. Pastoralists like the Maasai of Kenya traditionally have featured males involved in cattle-raising and females in food production.

The 19th-century European colonial period introduced a cash economy into Africa, with female labor used to produce the cash crops. By inserting male authority over females, colonial administrators disrupted the distinct yet complementary male/female relationship that had been traditionally African.

More recently, western influence across the continent has dramatically altered the traditional gender roles. Educational and professional opportunities for females, along with increased family migrations to urban areas, have radically altered traditional male and female gender roles.

Likewise, the number of single parents and even child- or other relative-led families has increased with the predominance of HIV/AIDS-related deaths and warfare, further altering traditional gender responsibilities. Additionally, ethnic conflicts involving abuse of women are prevalent in many unstable countries, and while the rubric of traditional African gender generally remains, the forces of change are gradually ripping it away.

## 6. Language and Communication

Language is a system for sharing information symbolically, whereby words are used to represent ideas. Communication is



defined as the cultural practice of sharing meaning in interaction, both verbally and non-verbally. America is predominantly a monolingual society, where traditionally, fluency in a second language has been considered a luxury

rather than a necessity. Conversely, national survival for many societies in Africa required them throughout their existence to

adopt multilingual practices, if for no other reason than to preserve their native heritage.

You may find it challenging to comprehend the scope of Africa's linguistic diversity. There are over 2,000 African languages (many spoken-only) from 6 major language families, and perhaps 100 of these languages are used to communicate among the more dominant ethnic groups such as Berber, Swahili, Yoruba, and others.

Official languages of African nation-states are few, yet the linguistic diversity expressed across the continent (Nigeria has 250 languages) has prompted an awareness of the value of Africa's linguistic traditions. While most areas of the continent speak the adopted language of their colonial past – such as French and Portuguese in West Africa, French and Arabic in Morocco, and English in Kenya and South Africa – the majority of people also speak one or more traditional “indigenous” languages of their and other ethnic groups. As African independence spread throughout the continent, ethnic groups continued to depend on their indigenous identifiers, such as language, to celebrate their “release” from colonial rule and to

preserve a sense of indigenous identity.

While communication styles tend to vary by ethnic or social groups, Africans generally are friendly and outgoing people although they tend to communicate with reserve to avoid

confrontation. As in most kin-based societies, Africans believe that saving face or protecting one's honor and dignity are of utmost importance; therefore, they avoid public criticism and controversial topics at all costs – even to the extent of withholding their honest opinion or modifying the truth.

Africans admire and even expect extended greetings and small talk, and to attempt to rush or avoid social graces is considered disrespectful. Similarly, Africans avoid direct eye contact when communicating with new acquaintances and people of status,



particularly elders. They also are fond of non-verbal gestures, and it is common throughout African societies for members of the same gender to hold hands or touch while conversing.

## 7. Learning and Knowledge

All cultures require that the older generation transmit important information to the younger generation. This information can be strictly factual (for example, how to fulfill subsistence and health requirements) and culturally traditional (the beliefs, behaviors, and symbols that have meaning to the community). This knowledge transfer may occur through structured, formalized systems such as schools or through informal learning by watching adults or peers.



The contemporary African educational system hardly resembles the traditional pre-colonial structure, whereby community elders were primarily responsible for preparing youth for adulthood. Their instruction included fundamentals of ethnic ritual and ceremony, along with customary protocol for their distinctive gender roles. A rite-of-passage commemorating their successful journey from childhood to adulthood served as a form of graduation.

European colonialism brought a more structured, formal educational system that catered to a small group of African elite who demonstrated potential to administer expanding colonial territories. Following independence, many African nations adopted the European system because they believed it would prepare them to be more competitive in intra-continental and global marketplaces, thereby enhancing their quality of life.

However, progress in developing and maintaining reliable educational institutions has been slow for a variety of reasons. Since most Africans live in rural environments, they continue to rely heavily on child labor for family survival, resulting in decreased school enrollments or early withdrawals. Likewise, widespread HIV/AIDS epidemics, ethnic conflict, teacher and resource deficits, and inaccessibility to remote rural areas also



hamper progress. According to 2023 statistics, about 100 million African children and youth were out of school, of which 35 million were of primary school age.

## 8. Time and Space

In every society, people occupy space and time in ways that are not directly linked to physical survival. In low-context western cultures, people tend to be preoccupied with strict time management, devoting less effort to relationship-building. Conversely, most African cultures are traditionally high-context societies, whereby people center their activities on socializing and establishing close associations, having little regard for the passage-of-time.

Only after establishing trust and honor will your typical African counterpart agreeably proceed with business. In his worldview, time is a precious commodity used to establish relationships



and form alliances. Any attempt to accelerate the tempo at the expense of social pleasantries will likely result in deadlock.

To an African, close physical proximity between individuals encourages cooperative trust, and for centuries they have viewed human linkage as a

core element to survival. This closeness is best represented in a traditional African village where strong kinship connections are evidenced by a display of close interpersonal relations among family members.

While conventional African concepts of time and space remain intact, throughout the continent western influence and globalization have stepped up the pace of African living, mostly in urban areas. Consequently, rural-to-urban migrations have reshaped traditional social and subsistence patterns.

## 9. Aesthetics and Recreation

Every culture has its own forms of creative expression that are guided by aesthetic principles of imagination, beauty, skill and style. Prior to 19th-century European colonization of Africa,

recreation served a vital subsistence role, whereby adolescents and adults alike participated in intellectually stimulating leisurely activities that concurrently served to develop essential hunting and pastoral skills.

Games of chance and skill were important to early childhood development, providing social outlets within and outside their community. Featuring wrestling, jumping and running; traditional African sport was steeped in religious ritual.



Along with colonialism came the introduction to Africa of western sports such as soccer, cricket, rugby and track and field. This emphasis on western sport continued to thrive with African independence and globalization, as seen in sporting events such as the Olympics and the World Cup.

Leaders such as Nelson Mandela skillfully employed sport to promote a unified South African nation. Importing the predominantly “white” game of rugby, Mandela used it to fuse a racially divided country following his election in 1992. This event is the theme of the motion picture “Invictus,” exemplifying how sport can serve to create national identities and overcome ethnic division. His efforts have inspired many other African nations to follow suit.



Likewise, East African countries such as Kenya and Ethiopia have produced the world’s dominant male and female distance runners, and South Africa, Cameroon and Nigeria emerged as strong contenders in the 2010 World Cup. African nations are now competing in leagues such as the International Basketball Association (FIBA) World Championships, and there is also a growing number of African

basketball players on US college campuses and in the National Basketball Association (NBA).

## 10. Sustenance and Health

Societies have different methods of transforming natural resources into food. These methods can shape residence patterns, family structures and economics. Theories of disease and healing practices exist in all cultures and serve as adaptive responses to disease and illness.



Despite having only 18% of the global population, Africa is a victim of many of the world's debilitating health disorders. According to the World Health Organization, 68% of the global HIV/AIDS cases and 95% of malarial diseases occur in Africa.

These and other medical conditions are attributed primarily to viral infection and widespread poverty caused by extreme climatic conditions and civil unrest, coupled with inadequate preventative measures. While extensive drought generates widespread famine, civil disturbances generate millions of displaced persons. Likewise, with only 65% of the Sub-Saharan African population having access to basic drinking water, water-borne bacterial diseases such as cholera and schistosomiasis are common.



Many people in Africa lack access to western medicine, and as a result depend on traditional health practices to combat disease. In addition, some traditional beliefs run counter to western medical practice and perhaps discourage individuals from utilizing those services even when they are available. This problem is further intensified by lack of federal regulatory healthcare management.

While modern healthcare procedures are more common in urban areas, many rural people rely on traditional practitioners who use a variety of plants and herbs to treat patients. Similarly, many families have their own secret remedies. While in some cases traditional medicine proves effective with fewer side effects than modern drugs, traditional practices do not adequately treat many of the more serious conditions.

On a positive note, western influence has stimulated some progress in combating Africa's health crisis. More resources are devoted to achieving basic human security by assessing disease symptoms early and with scientific accuracy.

## 11. Economics and Resources

This domain refers to beliefs regarding appropriate ways for a society to produce, distribute, and consume goods and services. Traditionally having an agrarian-based economy, Africa today remains predominantly agricultural, featuring less industrialization than most other parts of the world. Post-colonial adversities such as civil war, disease, poverty, and unstable dictatorships posed unusual hardship on several young African nations; however, Africa currently stands at the cross-roads of economic development with many nations becoming some of the fastest growing regions in the world.



Colonialism institutionalized the exploitation of Africa's mineral resources, resulting in today's oil industry dominating the economic market in several coastal regions. A surge in global oil prices; a growing African middle class; and reduction in civil wars, foreign aid, and inflation collectively promise a more positive outlook for the future.

Countries such as Botswana, Tunisia, Morocco, Egypt, and South Africa are economically the wealthiest on the continent, with regions such as East Africa showing signs of economic stability. Despite the economic upswing, much of sub-Saharan

Africa's future economic prosperity is held hostage by devastating diseases such as AIDS, particularly in areas of southern Africa, and the growing effects of climate change and man-made environmental degradation throughout the subcontinent.

## 12. Technology and Material

Societies use technology to transform their physical world, and culture heavily influences the development and use of technology. Africa lags far behind most of the world in manufacturing capacity and output. Even the more economically-developed nations such as South Africa are competitively weak when compared to non-African industrialized nations. During the 1970s and 1980s, Africa experienced some growth in raw exports although this increase did little to boost long-term manufacturing capacity.

Today, Africa is experiencing an actual decline in manufacturing capacity due primarily to a lull in the global economy, along with other indigenous issues such as environmental stress, poor physical and organizational infrastructure, and a shortage of skilled personnel. Likewise, African manufacturing capacity is no match against global powers such as China and significant Southeast Asian markets.



International aid from both governmental and non-governmental organizations has helped African nations establish preliminary economic footholds. For example, many of them have dedicated industrial developmental zones to attract foreign investment and increase export-related manufacturing capacity, although Africa is far removed from having a significant role in the global marketplace in the foreseeable future.

Now that we have introduced general concepts that characterize African society at large, we will now focus on specific features of Rwandan society.

# PART 2 – CULTURE SPECIFIC

## 1. HISTORY AND MYTH

### Historical Overview

For the past 400 years, Rwandan history has been characterized by a struggle among elites to control power and wealth. The tools they have used – including military force, opportunistic alliance, and labor exploitation – have shaped the complex ethnic landscape of modern Rwanda.

### Ancient Rwanda

Artifacts unearthed in Rwanda suggest that humans first began to settle in the region over 10,000 years ago. The diverse geography supported many different socio-economic systems, including hunting and gathering, nomadic cattle-herding, and a system of combined farming and herding that became the dominant mode of production over 1,000 years ago.

The mountainous landscape shaped Rwanda's earliest political structure: the hill. Because the rugged terrain made communication over long distances difficult, the people living on



each hill tended to form a distinct community. Herders and farmers shared the hills and were linked through social and economic ties.

Control of land and cattle, the signs of wealth in the region, became the basis of political power as chiefs distributed rights to land

and cattle in exchange for tribute. Population growth and the resulting competition for land encouraged political centralization, eventually resulting in a patchwork of small kingdoms, some organized around control of cattle and others around land. The system of patron-client relations that emerged in much of the region has been characterized as feudal, though there was much more mobility than in a classic feudal regime.

## The Nyiginya Kingdom

The roots of modern Rwanda lie in the Nyiginya Kingdom, a dynastic monarchy established in the 17th century when a wealthy herder named Nuganzu Ndori united several small kingdoms. Ndori established a permanent army and paid chiefs for political and military support, resulting in a political system that functioned more like a military state than a feudal kingdom. The Nyiginya monarchy was plagued by deception, as diverse elites, ranging from military commanders to ritual specialists, competed for resources and royal favor. This scramble for power left the Nyiginya Kingdom in a near constant state of war and impoverished the vast majority of the population, aiding the emergence of permanent and unequal social groups.

### The Myth of Gihanga

In ancient times, African myths were used to preserve history and wisdom across generations and ethnic boundaries. A popular Rwandan legend is that of Gihanga. When he founded the Nyiginya Kingdom, Nuganzu Ndori sought legitimacy by styling himself as the direct heir of Gihanga, a popular mythical conqueror. According to myth, Abanyiginya, the grandmother of Gihanga, revealed the secret of life to Nkuba, the god of thunder. Using this secret, Nkuba sculpted a small clay man and placed it in a jar containing milk and the heart of a bull. Nine months later, a man named Sabizeze emerged. Angry that his mother had told Nkuba the secret of life, Sabizeze fled to earth and fathered Gihanga, who eventually founded the Kingdom of Rwanda in the 10th or 11th century. Although there is no evidence that Gihanga was an actual historical figure, his story remains popular among Rwandans to this day.

## The Emergence of Ethnicity

One tool the Nyiginya Kingdom used to extend its authority was to exploit social divisions and ally itself with the most powerful

social groups. Growing population density and political centralization contributed to the emergence of increasing social inequality. The monarchy helped to expand an economic patronage system that extended court control and allowed its supporters to become increasingly wealthy. Around the 18th century, standard labels emerged for the diverse social groups. The term **Tutsi** meant elite and referred to those with power and wealth (particularly cattle). **Hutu** referred to commoners, mostly farmers, while **Twa** referred to the socially marginal hunter-gatherer community. This system allowed for a degree of social mobility. Hutu families that gained cattle and clients would take on the label Tutsi. However, this sort of mobility was generally not available to the Twa, who were seen by both Hutu and Tutsi as inferior, unclean, and primitive.

### Rwabugiri and the Rise of Centralized Rule

In the middle of the 19th century, after several decades of instability due to conflicts between the elite and the monarchy, Kigeri IV Rwabugiri reasserted the power of the monarchy. During his 4-decade rule, he expanded the territory of the kingdom, by this time known as Rwanda, and greatly enhanced the power of the monarchy. Rwabugiri maintained his power through force and terror, murdering many political opponents.

The divide between Hutu and Tutsi also grew during this time. Rwabugiri imposed harsh taxes on Hutu farmers, while completely exempting Tutsi herders who produced the milk and beef needed to feed the royal military. Rwabugiri dispatched Tutsi representatives into peripheral regions to help extend his control, imposing the Hutu-Tutsi categories even in areas where they had not previously been common.

### The Colonial Era

The colonial era began when **Ruanda-Urundi** (present-day Rwanda and Burundi) was designated a part of German East Africa in 1885, although German presence and influence in the area were limited. German rule came to an end in 1916 when Belgium invaded Ruanda-Urundi.





Both Germany and Belgium attempted to rule the colony through indigenous power structures. Belgium was awarded international recognition through the Versailles Treaty, which legitimized their role in Rwanda. Similarly, Belgium simplified the complex political system of pre-colonial Rwanda, eliminating the land chieftaincies usually held by Hutu, bolstering the power of the Tutsi elite and the central court.

**“Scientific” Racism:** Belgian administrators further reinforced Tutsi dominance by their adherence to a system of “scientific” racism based on apparent differences in height, skin tone, and bone structure among Hutu, Tutsi, and Twa. The Belgians measured differences precisely in order to create a classification system that they later used to issue ethnic identity cards.

The Tutsi were regarded as being taller, fairer-skinned, and



having longer noses than the Hutu and Twa, and for the Belgians, these were indicators that the Tutsi were their natural masters. Many Belgians believed that the Tutsi had some Caucasian blood. The Belgians placed severe restrictions on the Hutu and Twa, removing them from government positions and restricting

their access to education (see p.1-2 of *Learning and Knowledge*).

Some modern researchers have suggested that many of the variations in appearance among the ethnic groups may simply have reflected their nutrition. Height is an especially clear example: Tutsi herders consumed milk and beef, which promoted growth, while Hutu farmers subsisted on calorie-rich but nutrient-poor staple crops, limiting their growth. The legacy of rigid classification introduced by the Belgians persisted long past the end of the colonial era and obscured the flexible, class-based origin of these ethnic labels.

## Independence

In the late 1950s, an impatient Tutsi elite adopted a powerful nationalist stance and began to demand an immediate independence under a Tutsi monarchy. Hutu leaders feared continued Tutsi dominance and sought a government more representative of the Hutu majority. They formed Parmehutu; a political party led by Grégoire Kayibanda and began to advocate reform.

An uprising against Tutsi chiefs in November 1959 led many Tutsi elite to flee Rwanda – an action which marks the period when serious ethnic-based violence emerged. The Belgians, angered by the strident nationalism of the Tutsi elite, installed new Hutu chiefs and helped Parmehutu dismantle Tutsi rule. In 1961, the administration removed the monarch and supported Kayibanda in forming a Hutu provisional government.

## The Kayibanda Era

On July 1, 1962, Belgium granted independence to Rwanda and Burundi as separate countries. The new government led by Kayibanda aggressively pursued an explicit policy of empowering the Hutu at the expense of the Tutsi. Attacks on Rwanda by groups of armed Tutsi refugees in 1961-1964 led to reprisal massacres by the new Hutu army that killed many Tutsi and drove over 150,000 (constituted over half of the Tutsi population) to flee Rwanda.

After a decade in office, as Rwanda's economy stagnated, Kayibanda lost popular support and sought to consolidate his power around trusted people from his home region in southern Rwanda. His action alienated northern Hutu, including Defense Minister Juvénal Habyarimana who feared dismissal. The massacre of Burundian Hutu in 1972



by the Tutsi Burundian army inspired attacks on Tutsi in Rwanda in 1973, destabilizing the country and setting the stage for a July 5, 1973 coup d'état that made Habyarimana the President.

## The Habyarimana Era

Habyarimana consolidated power by forming a new single political party and focusing on economic development. By the late 1980s, an economic downturn led to growing discontent and demands for political reform. Habyarimana used Tutsi scapegoats in an attempt to win back Hutu support. In October 1990, the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), a rebel group formed by Tutsi exiles whose ancestors were displaced to neighboring Uganda in the early 1960s, attacked northern Rwanda. Habyarimana quickly suppressed the invasion with the help of French, German, and Zairian mercenaries. Habyarimana then expanded and strengthened the Rwandan army while instituting reprisals against Tutsi and their southern Hutu supporters.

The RPF continued attacks on Rwanda, prompting the international community to broker the August 1993 Arusha Accord, which stated that Habyarimana must share political power and allow Tutsi refugees to return to Rwanda. The Arusha Accord was widely perceived as pro-Tutsi and did little to calm ethnic tensions, which were further inflamed by anti-Tutsi propaganda and the assassination of Burundi's Hutu president by Tutsi members of the Burundian military. These tensions translated into broad support for "Hutu Power," a movement closely associated with Habyarimana that promoted Hutu solidarity against the ambitions of the RPF and the Tutsi.



## Genocide

These rising tensions led the Hutu regime to develop the tools that would ultimately make the genocide so grimly successful. The regime procured \$100 million worth of military support and armed the *Interahamwe*, a paramilitary death squad. The spark for the Rwandan genocide came on April 6, 1994, when a plane carrying Habyarimana was shot down near Kigali International Airport, killing everyone onboard. Although it is still unknown who was responsible, the incident prompted the Hutu regime to call for the elimination of its opponents, including the complete extermination of the Tutsi. Orders were issued through the bureaucracy and mass media for the *Interahamwe*

to organize “work” groups that were responsible for setting up barriers, capturing victims, and shelling them with small arms or hacking them to death with machetes.

Some Hutu took part in this gruesome process because they harbored an intense hatred of the Tutsi. Others were motivated by ambition, seeking the political rank given to the most efficient killers, or by greed, hoping to steal the property of those they murdered. Many more, probably the vast majority, were motivated by the simple fact that they would become victims if they did not become killers.

In less than 100 days, the Hutu militia, backed by the army and police, murdered an estimated 800,000 Tutsi and moderate Hutu. The death squads murdered men, women, and children, even infants, hoping to prevent the Tutsi from ever regaining power. Neighbors, friends, and even relatives of perpetrators were shown no mercy. Hundreds of thousands of girls and women were raped or sexually enslaved during the genocide.



While some Hutu in Kigali were killed for their political views, most Hutu who died (up to half of the total population of those killed) did so as a result of mistaken identity or an unwillingness on the part of the Interahamwe to make any attempt to determine who they were killing at the mass killing sites.

**International Response:** The international community did nothing to interrupt this attempt to eliminate an entire social group. Before the genocide, there were 2,500 UN troops in Rwanda who were responsible for monitoring compliance with the Arusha Accord. Two weeks after the start of the genocide, the UN reduced this force to 270 in response to the torture and murder of 10 Belgian soldiers. Neither the original nor the reduced force was legally permitted to intervene. At the end of April 1994, the UN Security Council passed a resolution that

condemned the events in Rwanda but studiously avoided the word “genocide,” as its use would have created a legal obligation to intervene under the 1948 Genocide Convention. In mid-May, after the genocide was well underway, the UN finally voted to send 5,500 troops to Rwanda for the protection of civilians. However, the Security Council failed to act quickly enough, so these troops were not deployed until the end of the genocide.

**Invasion by the RPF:** On April 8, two days after the start of the genocide, the RPF launched a major invasion to force the Hutu regime from power. The RPF reached the outskirts of Kigali by April 11, causing the interim Hutu government to flee to the city of Gitarama. After nearly 3 months of steady progress, the RPF entered Kigali on July 4. The Hutu regime and militia, along with many Hutu civilians, fled to Zaire. The RPF declared victory on

July 18, 1994, and established a unity government headed by a Hutu, Pasteur Bizimungu. The Tutsi head of the RPF, Major General Paul Kagame, was named Vice President and Minister of Defense. Kagame became Rwanda’s current President when Bizimungu resigned in 2000 (see p.3 of *Political and Social Relations*).



It is noteworthy that there were actually two wars conducted simultaneously, and while distinct, they were closely linked. One was a conventional civil war, while the other was the actual genocide. The civil war actually drove the genocidal killing, which it appears the Hutu initially had hoped would deter the RPF advance. When it failed to do so, the Interahamwe escalated the killing in retribution as it soon became clear the RPF would slowly take control of the country.

### **Aftermath**

Despite the RPF’s definitive victory, the violence did not end with the genocide. Hutu militants who had fled to Zaire began to regroup, eventually forming a rebel group allied with Mobutu Sese Seko, then leader of Zaire. They staged attacks on Tutsi in Zaire which prompted the Rwandan army to invade Zaire in 1996. By 1997, the Rwandan army had toppled the Mobutu

regime and installed Congolese rebel leader Laurent Kabila, as President of Zaire, which he renamed the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) (not to be confused with the neighboring country – the Republic of Congo).

The region was still not peaceful. Although the Rwandan army drove over 600,000 Hutu back to Rwanda from the DRC, most of the rebels fled deep into the Congolese forests and proceeded to earn a fearsome reputation for rape, murder, and slavery. Meanwhile, Rwanda and Uganda began to grow mistrustful of Laurent Kabila, leading them to support a largely Tutsi rebel group based in Eastern DRC.

These and other ongoing tensions eventually resulted in the Second Congo War, which according to one estimate, by 2008 had claimed 5.4 million lives and resulted in displacement of vast populations. All sides of the conflict plundered the Congo's mineral wealth in order to fund continuing hostilities (see p.2 of



*Economics and Resources*). Although the Rwandan army formally withdrew from the DRC at war's end in 2002, Rwanda remains deeply involved in conflicts in the region.

### Recovery and Reconciliation

Recovery from the genocide continues. Although the RPF government initially imprisoned over 100,000 people on charges of genocide, it was estimated that the resulting legal cases would take over a century to resolve. Therefore, the government chose to try all but the most serious perpetrators at the local level through non-professional **gacaca** courts, which require perpetrators to face their communities, publicly apologize for their crimes, and atone for their actions through community service. The legal backlog was reduced, but it also resulted in genocide survivors living side-by-side with perpetrators.

## 2. POLITICAL AND SOCIAL RELATIONS

### Official Name

Republic of Rwanda  
*République Rwandaise*  
*Republika y'u Rwanda*

### Political Borders

Burundi: 180 mi  
 Democratic Republic of  
 the Congo (DRC): 134 mi  
 Uganda: 105 mi  
 Tanzania: 134 mi

### Capital

Kigali

### Demographics

Rwanda's population of nearly 13.6 million is growing about 1.62% per year. About 38% of the population is under the age of 15, and about 82% of the population lives in rural areas and engages in subsistence farming. With a land area roughly equal to that of Vermont but with twenty times as many people, Rwanda is the 2nd most densely populated country in Africa.



### Flag

The flag consists of three horizontal bands of sky blue, representing happiness and peace; yellow, representing economic and mineral wealth; and green, representing natural resources and the hope

for prosperity. The sun in the upper right corner symbolizes unity, enlightenment, and freedom from ignorance. This flag was adopted in 2001 to replace Rwanda's former flag, which had become associated with the genocide (see p.6-8 of *History and Myth*).

## Geography

Rwanda is located in the African Great Lakes region, bordering Uganda to the North, Tanzania to the east, Burundi to the south, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo to the west. Lake Kivu, with a surface area of over 1,000 square miles, is the largest of 28 lakes that fall within Rwanda's borders. Rwanda is about 750 miles from the nearest ocean.

Rwanda is known as the "Land of a Thousand Hills" because of its high and hilly landscape, which ranges from volcanoes and steep mountains in the West to gently rolling hills and uninhabited swampy valleys in the East. The highest point is Mount Karisimbi, a 14,790-foot volcano on the Congolese border in Volcanoes National Park. This park is home to Rwanda's famous mountain gorillas, which draw thousands of visitors each year. Rwanda is also home to zebra, antelope, buffalo, impala, monkeys, and around 200 distinct bird species.



**Natural Hazards:** Mount Nyiragongo is an active volcano located just across Rwanda's northwest border near the Congolese city of Goma. It has erupted twice in the past 35 years, most recently in 2021. Another eruption could directly threaten the one million residents of the city of Goma in the DRC and create severe secondary effects for the residents of nearby Gisenyi, Rwanda. There is also earthquake activity in the area: in 2021, an earthquake injured 10 people and damaged 859 buildings in the Robavu District of Rwanda.

## Climate

Rwanda enjoys a mild and temperate climate. Temperatures hover within a few degrees of 75°F throughout the year, although the mountainous Northwest tends to be cooler than the lower-lying East, with temperatures ranging from 50°F to 59°F. It gets hotter in the savanna area in the East bordering Tanzania and the tropical area bordering Burundi in the South. Rwanda owes its pleasant weather to the fact that no part of the country lies



lower than 3,000 feet above sea level. Rwanda has two rainy seasons (from February to May and from September to December), which account for nearly all of Rwanda's 31 inches of annual rainfall. The West experiences nearly twice as much rainfall as the East.



### Government

Rwanda is a presidential republic divided into 5 *intara*, or provinces: Northern, Southern, Eastern, Western, and Kigali City. These provinces are divided further into 30 *uterere* or districts composed of 418 *imirenge*, or sectors, each of which contains 8-12 *utagari*, or cells.

Rwanda has 10 political parties, with the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) currently leading a governing coalition of 5 parties.

### Executive Branch

The President, currently Paul Kagame, is head-of-state, commander-in-chief of the armed forces, and guardian of national unity. The President also appoints the Prime Minister, currently Edouard Ngirente, to lead his Cabinet and execute the laws of the republic. The President was limited to 2 terms of 7 years, but recent reforms decreased term limits to 5 years and included an exception that allowed President Kagame to serve another seven-year term in 2017, followed by a 5-year term in 2024, and potentially allowing an additional five-year term.

### Legislative Branch

Rwanda has a 2-chamber Parliament composed of a Senate and a Chamber of Deputies.

**Senate:** It consists of 26 members who serve 8-year terms and are not elected by popular vote:

- 12 are elected by local councils.
- 8 are appointed by the President.
- 6 are chosen by other organizations.

**Chamber of Deputies:** It consists of 80 members who serve 5-year terms.

- 53 are elected by popular vote.

- 24, who must be women, are appointed by local councils.
- 3 are appointed by youth and disability organizations.

## Political Climate

President Kagame is widely admired for ending the genocide and restoring peace, order, and security to a broken nation (see p.8 of *History and Myth*). However, he has faced criticism for his allegedly authoritarian tendencies and his controversial military expeditions in the Congo. Although Kagame's position remains secure, splits are becoming evident within the RPF as exiled former allies join a growing group of international observers in affirming governmental civil and political rights violations.

## Defense

Rwanda's armed forces are known as the Rwandan Defense Forces (RDF). The RDF is almost entirely a light infantry force, comprising an army, a small, rotary wing air force, and a few specialized inter-service units. While the RDF currently includes approximately 33,000 active-duty personnel, the government plans to demobilize many regulars and create a reserve force of 100,000. In addition to the RDF, there is also a local defense force with approximately 2,000 personnel.



The RDF is known as a well-educated, well-trained, and highly disciplined force – particularly for its competency in guerilla tactics. Highly regarded by the Rwandan population, the RDF generally enjoys high troop morale.

**Air Force:** The small Rwandan Air Force (RAF) is primarily used for transporting senior government officials and supporting counter-insurgency operations. Based at Kigali International Airport, the RAF has a small fleet of French and Russian helicopters. Due to a lack of resources, the RAF has no rapid deployment capability and relies upon cargo aircraft chartered from regional airports for troop deployment. Although the RAF has few experienced personnel, increasing numbers are being trained by South African and Indian personnel at a training facility opened in a Kigali suburb in 2005.

## Rwandan Air Force Rank Insignia



General



Lieutenant  
General



Major  
General



Brigadier  
General



Colonel



Lieutenant  
Colonel



Major



Captain



Lieutenant



Second  
Lieutenant



Warrant  
Officer I



Warrant  
Officer II



Sergeant  
Major



Staff  
Sergeant



Sergeant



Corporal

## Security Issues

**The Congo:** Instability in eastern Congo is likely Rwanda's most pressing security concern, emerging in 1994 when genocide perpetrators and the remnants of the Hutu regime fled there from Rwanda to escape the advancing Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) (see p.8 of *History and Myth*). These Hutu forces later regrouped in Zaire and formed the FDLR (*Forces*



*Démocratiques de Libération du Rwanda*), a paramilitary group intent on restoring the Hutu to power and finishing the work of the genocide. Although the Rwandan army has fought two wars against

the FDLR in the past 15 years, the FDLR is still active in Eastern Congo, Burundi, Tanzania, and Uganda. Although the FDLR is not a genuine military threat to Rwanda, they do sometimes fire shots across the border and stage small incursions into the western part of the country. In addition, the conflict has flooded Rwanda with roughly 79,720 Congolese refugees, whom the country is ill-equipped to accommodate.

**Attacks with Small Explosives:** Although Rwanda is relatively free of crime and violence, there have been several attacks with small explosives since 2007, more recently a grenade attack in Kamembe in 2019 left four people injured. Two attacks in 2010 were staged at genocide memorial centers, and the government claims to have linked a number of the attacks to FDLR operatives, but many observers blame the attacks on former RPF members now opposing Kagame's rule. Overall, Kigali is one of Africa's safest urban areas.

## Diplomatic Relations

Rwanda enjoys generally good diplomatic relations with most Western governments, especially the US and the UK. The US, which is Rwanda's biggest single-country donor, has shifted since the genocide from providing primarily humanitarian and security aid towards supporting development projects. Although Rwanda attracts high levels of foreign aid from international organizations (see p.3 of *Economics and Resources*), many

partners have expressed concern about allegations of Rwandan-sponsored atrocities in Congo. These concerns were detailed in a 545-page UN report released in August 2010 that associates Rwanda with 617 war crimes committed between 1993 and 2003 in its wars in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The report, which details incidents of mass murder, rape, child slavery, and destruction of property, suggests that some of Rwanda's crimes amount to genocide. Rwanda has angrily dismissed the report and even threatened to withdraw its peacekeeping forces from Darfur if the UN stood by its allegations.

Rwanda's current government also has a troubled relationship with France, a close ally of the Habyarimana regime. This relationship reached a low point in 2006, when a French judge issued a warrant for Kagame's arrest that implicated him in the death of Habyarimana (see p.5 of *History and Myth*). Rwanda responded by ending diplomatic relations with France and, in 2008, released a report accusing France of complicity in the genocide and calling for the arrest of several former Presidents and Prime Ministers. Recently, however, the relationship between France and Rwanda has begun to thaw after then-French President Nicolas Sarkozy visited Kigali in 2010 and acknowledged French mistakes during the genocide.

## Ethnic Relations

Ethnicity plays a complicated role in post-genocide Rwanda.

Rwanda's new constitution, ratified in 2003, prohibits ethnic discrimination in absolute terms. Although it has become a social taboo to converse openly about

ethnicity (see p.5 of *Language and Communication*), it remains a subtle but powerful organizing force in Rwandan society.



**Ethnicity and Power:** Although the RPF party comprises both Hutu and Tutsi, political power and authority in post-genocide Rwanda are firmly controlled by the Tutsi, who make up about 19% of the population but hold about half of all government

positions and dominate the civil service. This mismatch has resulted in tension between the government and the Hutu majority. Some commentators have suggested that the RPF's economic policies have intentionally included too little support for agriculture, the backbone of the economy and a source of employment for 90% of the predominantly Hutu workforce.

**Ethnicity Today:** Ethnicity has not been an identifiable characteristic in Rwanda during the past century, especially in cities like Kigali. Hutu and Tutsi wear the same clothing, speak the same language, live in the same neighborhoods, attend the same social events, and even marry one another. Yet individuals still identify themselves by ethnicity and generally know the ethnicity of others, even though it is not discussed openly. Powerful stereotypes regarding the physical characteristics of each ethnicity endure; despite the widely shared sense that there is limited truth behind such stereotypes (see p.4 of *History and Myth*). Although inter-ethnic relationships are fairly common, especially among the young, many Rwandans report that the events of 1994 make it difficult to fully trust members of other ethnicities.

## Social Relations

Rwandans emphasize respect in interactions, and usually award it according to social status, which includes gender, education, age, wealth, and personal relationships.



**Gender:** Rwandan society generally accords higher status to men than to women (see p.1-2 of *Sex and Gender*). Dining etiquette is an example: men sit in chairs and eat

first, while women and children sit on the floor and eat once the men have finished.

**Age:** Respect for elders, like respect for men, is an important part of social relations regardless of other social classifications. Rwandans usually address elders with respectful titles (see p.4 of *Language and Communications*).

**Personal Relationships:** Rwandans are loyal to family and friends, often demonstrated within professional contexts: it is common for powerful figures to grant preferential treatment to those close to them. As a result, some individuals enjoy high social status simply through their connections.

### Gift Giving

Rwandans give gifts to one another both in formal settings such as weddings and informal settings such as social visits. If the social visit is a special occasion, the guest may present the host with a gift of beer or food. Conversely, it is also common for the host to present the guest with food at the end of his or her visit. Gifts are judged according to a hierarchy: cattle are the most significant gift, followed by alcoholic beverages, then by food. Cattle are so significant that it is common to recognize an extraordinary favor by saying, "What you did for me, you gave me a cow." When giving or receiving a gift, it is respectful to use the right hand while grasping the right forearm with the left hand.

**Status Indicators:** The characteristics of Rwanda's social elite have changed in response to the events of recent decades. Prior to the genocide, the members of Rwanda's social elite retained close ties to rural life and their native hills (see *History and Myth*). This profile changed dramatically after the genocide when the RPF drove the Hutu elite from Rwanda and took control of the government, becoming the new social elite.

The members of the RPF primarily come from families who were forced to flee Rwanda decades before the genocide for cities in neighboring countries. As a result, the accession of the RPF has enabled a shift in indicators of social status away from those associated with rural life towards those associated with urban life. One example of this shift is the growing significance of money as a standard of wealth, as opposed to land or cattle (see p.3 of *Economics and Resources*).

## 3. RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY

### Religion and Spirituality Overview

Rwanda is a predominantly Christian country (approximately 96% of the total population) with a small but growing Muslim minority. Estimates from 2019-2020 reported religious affiliation as follows:

- 38% Catholic
- 58% Protestant
- 2% Muslim
- 1% No Religion
- 1% Other and Indigenous Religion

The Christian majority is highly diverse, comprising a wide variety of denominations which incorporate many aspects of indigenous religions into their beliefs and practices. This diversity is encouraged by the fact that religion is not a source of group identity in Rwanda: all faiths have adherents from different ethnicities and regions. It is common for individuals to change from one Christian denomination to another, and many families include adherents of more than one faith.

### Indigenous Religions

Religious practices have historically provided a basis for political power in Rwanda primarily because of the traditional belief that kings are the living embodiment of *Imana*, a term variously translated as “God,”

“essence of life,” or “fertility.” In order to establish their legitimacy as rulers, kings had to perform rituals which bestowed the “essence of life” upon their people. Christian missionaries used the word *Imana* to refer to God, so the term today is widely used to refer to the Christian God and appears in many Rwandan names (see p.3-4 of *Family and Kinship*).





Kings also used religion to support royal authority in other ways. One of the most common approaches was to establish cults for ancestral spirits, who were considered to be actively involved in human affairs and who could be pleased or angered. Kings often made royal decisions in an *ijaboro*, a small shrine dedicated to the ancestral spirit of the royal family. Kings reinforced the importance of the royal ancestral spirits by staging elaborate theatrical performances which promoted the idea of a divinely ordained social hierarchy.

In addition to these public manifestations of indigenous religion, Rwandan families traditionally practiced rituals that showed respect to their ancestors and linked the living to the dead. Although court rituals disappeared with the demise of the monarchy, many families continue to venerate their ancestors.

### Christianity

Christianity was first brought to Rwanda by Western missionaries at the beginning of the 20th century with the Catholics first to arrive in 1900, followed by Protestants in 1907. Many other denominations followed after World War I, including Baptists from Denmark, Pentecostals from Sweden, and Free Methodists and Seventh Day Adventists from the US. Pentecostals would eventually become the largest Protestant denomination in the 1990s.



It was the Catholic Church, however, that became the most powerful social institution in Rwanda. The Church played a key role in promoting ethnic divisions, backing the “scientific” racism of the Belgian administration (see p.4 of *History and Myth*) with passages from the Old

Testament. This ideological support allowed the Tutsi ruling class to justify its power and privilege by selectively applying Catholic principles. The Church also used its control over Rwanda’s schools to bar many Hutu from receiving an education (see p.1-2 of *Learning and Knowledge*).

In the 1950s, as Tutsi leaders sought to gain independence from Belgium, both the colonial government and the Church switched their support to the Hutu. The Church justified its new position as support for a persecuted Hutu majority and backed the anti-Tutsi policies of Hutu Presidents Grégoire Kayibanda and Juvénal Habyarimana (see p.5-6 of *History and Myth*).

**Christianity and the Genocide:** Christian churches, especially the Catholic Church of Rwanda, provided moral support to the genocide. Both local Catholic and Protestant leaders remained allies of the Hutu government throughout the genocide, implicitly allowing Hutu extremists to use religious imagery and rhetoric to incite hatred of the Tutsi. This religious propaganda, combined with the failure of Christian leaders to condemn the genocide, allowed perpetrators to reconcile their brutal actions with their Christian faith: genocide perpetrators sometimes attended mass before a massacre or paused in the middle of killing to pray at the church altar (see p.6-7 of *History and Myth*).

Some Hutu clergy participated in the genocide, using their intimate knowledge of their communities to help identify who was Tutsi or allowing the



murder of Tutsi who had sought refuge in the church. Notorious examples include the Archbishop of Rwanda, who turned over nuns and priests to death squads, and two Benedictine nuns, who provided Hutu killers with 7,000 Tutsi victims and the gasoline to burn 500 of them alive. In fact, more Tutsi were killed in churches during the genocide than anywhere else.

However, not every member of the clergy supported the genocide. Many were Tutsi, and therefore, a target themselves. Some Hutu clergy opposed the massacres and died defending the Tutsi who took refuge in their churches.

## Pentecostalism

Since the genocide, there has been a proliferation of Pentecostal Christian churches. By emphasizing forgiveness, healing, reconciliation, and hope, Pentecostals have found a natural audience in post-genocide Rwanda. Many Pentecostal churches were established by returned refugees or Western sponsors and



preach themes that resonate strongly with Rwandans including liberation from poverty, sickness, and evil. These churches also provide a sense of refuge and community, which is particularly important in a

country with large displaced populations and a society having been frayed at the edges. This emphasis on refuge also contrasts positively with mainstream Christian churches, which largely abandoned the responsibility to provide refuge during the genocide.

## Hybrid Religious Practices

The majority of Rwandans worship in a tradition that blends elements of both indigenous religions and Christianity. Many of the traditional customs that Rwandans incorporate into their Christian practices pertain to death and the afterlife. For example, many Rwandans practice traditional funeral rites alongside Christian ones. Rwandans also continue to practice *kwera*, a ritual that marks the end of a period of mourning (see p.4 of *Family and Kinship*). Finally, many Rwandans continue to revere ancestral spirits in hopes of contacting *Imana*, who is seen as benevolent but distant.

## Witchcraft

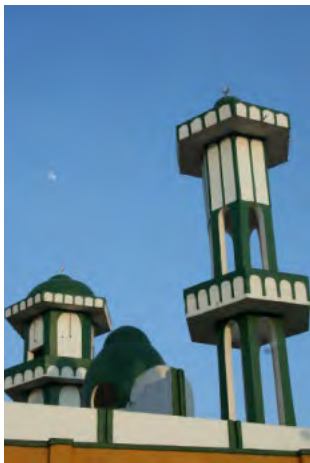
Both women and men can be accused of being a *murozi*, which is translated as “poisoner,” “enemy of the community,” or simply “witch.” Accusations of witchcraft are common in Rwanda, as they are in the African Great Lakes region more generally, and they often accompany political violence and turmoil. They are

most common in rural areas, where neighbors and family members often clash over scarce land and resources.

## Islam

Islam was introduced to Rwanda by Swahili-speaking traders in the early 20th century. Although Rwandan Muslims enjoyed good relations with German colonizers, the Belgians marginalized them by barring them from education, government, and most jobs. Muslims continued to be targeted in independent Rwanda, as political crises in the 1960s brought organized attacks against allegedly anti-Hutu Muslims. These attacks occurred despite the fact that the Rwandan Muslim community, like the Rwandan Christian community, includes both Hutu and Tutsi.

Since the genocide, however, Islam has blossomed in Rwanda and developed a more positive social profile. By some estimates, 5-8% of Rwandans now practice Islam, a sharp increase from just over 1% in 1991. Muslims are believed to be less guilty than Christians of having participated in the genocide, and many stories have emerged of Muslims offering protection to the Tutsi during the genocide. Although some Muslims participated in the genocide, the Muslim community largely refused to divide itself along ethnic lines, demonstrating a sense of solidarity forged through years of marginalization. Since the genocide, the Muslim community has played a strong role in national reconciliation, and the head *mufti* of Rwanda, an authority on Islamic law, has even declared a *jihad*, or holy struggle, against hatred and ignorance between Hutu and Tutsi.



## 4. FAMILY AND KINSHIP

### Overview

Across all social and ethnic boundaries, family is one of the most important institutions in Rwanda. The ideal family is large and durable, providing vital economic, political, and social support to group members. The particular strength and flexibility of family, lineage, and clan relationships have helped Rwandans adapt to changes in culture and traditions since the colonial era, and they have been essential in promoting reconciliation after the genocide.

### Family and Residence

Rwanda's basic household family unit is the ***inzu***, which resembles a nuclear family (consists of parents and their offspring). Following marriage, a young couple traditionally resides near the husband's family and establishes its own ***inzu***. In rural areas, each ***inzu*** occupies a home which is part of a larger ***urugo***, a family homestead or compound that is enclosed by a fence or hedge. The ***urugo*** from a single ***umuryango*** or lineage – a group of relatives who trace their ancestry to a single common ancestor – often located in close proximity, usually on a single hill, the basic historic social and political unit (see p.1 of *History and Myth*).



### Male Authority

The oldest male in each ***urugo*** is considered the head-of-compound and is responsible for ensuring that it functions as an economic and social support system for its residents. Although he has no formal or legal authority, this man plays an important informal role as a dispute mediator.

The husband is considered head of the ***inzu***, and inheritance is traditionally divided among a man's sons. This system is changing in the wake of post-genocide legislation guaranteeing women equal property and inheritance rights.

## Clans

While members of the smallest social units typically live side-by-side, members of the largest social unit, the clan, are dispersed throughout the country. Clans are very large: the over 13.6 million people in Rwanda today trace their membership to only about 18 different clans. However, despite their large size, clans do not have formal leaders or organizational structures. Clan membership is transferred from father to child and cuts across ethnic, religious, and social divides: most clans contain Hutu, Tutsi, and Twa. Every Rwandan knows his or her own clan affiliation. While clans tend to determine business and political affiliations, they have little significance in everyday life beyond determining eligible marriage partners.

## Dating

Casual dating is uncommon in rural areas, where young people usually meet and get acquainted at school, church, or the market. If a young man is interested in a young woman for marriage, he asks permission from her father or uncle to court her and presents gifts of food and drink to her family. In urban areas, young people may date and have several casual relationships before settling on a marriage partner.

## Marriage

Marriage is an important and respected social institution in Rwanda. Young people are expected to marry, and it is considered unusual for someone to remain single. Individuals are generally free to select their own spouses, usually from outside their



clans and subject to parental approval. Ethnicity is usually not a barrier: marriage between Hutu and Tutsi remains somewhat common even after the genocide. However, due to social isolation, the Twa rarely marry members of other ethnicities.

**Weddings:** If a couple does not receive parental approval, they may enter into common-law marriage. However, Rwandans prefer officially sanctioned, often elaborate marriage ceremonies

that can take place at home, in a church, or before civil authorities. During the ceremony, family members of the groom proclaim their affection for the bride and her family, as well as their intention to care for her and her children. Food and drink are shared, and dances are performed.

**Bridewealth:** The payment of a bridewealth, traditionally one or more cows, is compensation paid by the groom's family to the bride's family. With this payment, the new alliance between the two families is validated, and strong reciprocal relationships between families, lineages, and clans are forged. Today, the bridewealth is often monetary, and because it is reimbursable upon divorce, family pressure will discourage dissolution of the marriage to avoid having to repay the bridewealth.

**Polygyny:** In the past, it was considered a sign of wealth and social standing for a man to have more than one wife. In such arrangements, each wife lived with her children in a separate *urugo*. Although the spread of Christianity and Western-style education has made polygyny less common, it is still widespread in some rural areas of the Northwest.

### Children

Rwandans view children as a sign of wealth and well-being, and the birth of a child is welcomed as a natural and happy event. Families are typically large:



on average, each woman gives birth to 3-4 children, although a high infant mortality rate impacts family size (see p.4 of *Sustenance and Health*). Despite cultural and religious reservations about the use of contraception, a combination of overpopulation and scarce resources has compelled the government to promote family planning. Rwandans take great care to raise their children to behave respectfully, especially towards elders.

### Rites-of-Passage

**Birth:** Most children are born at home, where the mother and child remain for 7 days after birth in order to rest and recover.

On the 8th day after birth, the child is given a name in an elaborate ceremony. During this ceremony, the child is presented for the first time to friends and family members, who suggest names for the child as they enjoy refreshments. However, the honor of making the final selection of the child's name is reserved for the father. Names often reflect circumstances at the time of the child's birth, such as war, peace, famine, or abundance, or patriotic and religious themes, such as **Imana** (supreme being – see p.1 of *Religion and Spirituality*). Sometimes, names are even inspired by cattle, which are traditionally a prized possession for Rwandans (see p.3 of *Economics and Resources*).

**Death:** Even in Rwanda's predominantly Christian society, funeral rites still include elements of indigenous faiths (see p.1-5 of *Religion and Spirituality*). Prior to burying the deceased, the bereaved observe a mourning period of several days which concludes with **kwera**, a purification ceremony, and the ritual consumption of food and drink. Narrowly defined, family members must jointly perform these rituals: since the married daughters of the deceased are considered part of their husbands' families, they sometimes do not participate in the mourning ceremonies.

## Traditional Family Expressions

### Wedding Toast

*Murumbuke, mubyare hungu na kobwa...*

"Be fruitful, may you have many sons and daughters..."

### Greeting to a New Mother

*Nimwonkwe kandi usubireyo nta mahwa!*

"Congratulations, and go back for more!"

### General Saying

*Abana ni umutungo.*

"Children are your wealth."



## Social Change

Rwanda's kinship traditions were severely disrupted by the genocide. The majority of genocide deaths were male, resulting in a large number of widows and female-headed households. Similarly, the majority of the 98,000 prisoners remaining in jail since the genocide are males. The traditional practice of levirate marriage, in which a widow marries the brother of her deceased husband, has collapsed due to the death toll and disintegration of social structure brought on by the genocide. Women have



stepped in to fulfill traditionally male roles (see p.2 of *Sex and Gender*), changing family dynamics and relationships.

In order to survive, many widows have been forced to engage in undesirable and low-status occupations. Because widows and their

children are often socially marginalized and considered a symbol of social disorder, the family and household are no longer their primary source of social identity and economic support. Instead, support often comes from women's associations and cooperatives that have been formed in recent years (see p.2-3 of *Sex and Gender*) for a further discussion on the changing roles of women since the genocide.

Genocide, along with the HIV/AIDS epidemic (see p.5 of *Sustenance and Health*), has also led to an upsurge in Rwanda's orphan population. After the genocide, as many as



one million Rwandan children lived in child-headed households, in underfunded orphanages, or on the street. Because of the psychological trauma they endured, children orphaned during the genocide are particularly vulnerable to post-traumatic stress or self-destructive behavior as they now enter adulthood. These disorders can further impede them from successfully integrating into employment training or schooling.

## 5. SEX AND GENDER

### Overview

In pre-colonial Rwanda, women enjoyed some political and economic power. Within the royal court (see *History and Myth*), the queen mother was so powerful that some European explorers spoke of Rwanda as a territory ruled by a queen. However, the status of women eroded considerably during the colonial period, and following independence women held few political positions and had little economic power. Recently, opportunities for women have expanded due to government support for gender equality, changes in inheritance law, and the work of women's organizations. Rwanda has the highest percentage of women in Parliament of any African nation.



### Gender Values

Rwandans use the expression “*uli umugabo*,” or “you are a man,” to praise excellent performance by either gender. **Ubugabo**, or manliness, connotes courage and steadfastness, although its primary meaning is “virility.” The link

between moral fortitude, accomplishment, and masculinity sends a subtle yet powerful message that maleness is more highly valued.

Conversely, female gender stereotypes depict the ideal woman as modest, silent, and submissive. These values have shifted due to the broad societal changes which have occurred since the genocide and now include a broader understanding of the role of women (see *Family and Kinship*).

### Traditional Gender Roles

Traditionally, labor within the family is defined by gender: males perform productive labor (cultivating crops, grazing livestock, constructing houses, and negotiating business deals), while females perform reproductive labor (caring for kin) in addition to domestic duties and subsistence farming. The husband has ultimate authority over all family matters; therefore, wives are subordinate to their husbands in household decision-making.

## Gender and the Genocide

There were both female victims and female perpetrators in the genocide. The main victims were the approximately 250,000 Tutsi women and Hutu wives of Tutsi men who were targeted in an organized campaign of rape, sexual slavery, genital mutilation, and murder. The main female perpetrators were women who spied on their Tutsi neighbors and located hidden Tutsi for the **Interahamwe**, the Hutu regime's paramilitary death squad (see *History and Myth*).

## Gender Issues

**Changing Gender Roles:** High male mortality during the genocide changed household composition and, in many cases, gender roles:

after the genocide 60% of households in Rwanda were headed by women, approximately half of whom were widows. This shortage of male household members resulted in a serious labor deficit, particularly for activities requiring physical strength and tasks culturally restricted to men (see *Family and Kinship*).



Some women in rural areas have been forced to engage in undesirable and low-status wage labor and petty trade in order to make ends meet. In urban areas, a number of women have become bankers, cab drivers, or mechanics – jobs previously viewed as men's work.

**Prostitution and Sexual Abuses:** Although illegal, prostitution is present in Rwanda. Most sex workers are women, although some children are also exploited in the urban sex industry. In addition, a small number of Rwandan women and children are trafficked to nearby countries and Europe, where they are forced to perform sexual, domestic, or agricultural labor. Another significant issue is the extensive rape and ostracism prevalent during and after the genocide, resulting in a tarnished lifestyle for many women.

**Female Genital Mutilation (FGM):** Unlike many African societies, Rwanda does not promote the traditional FGM practice, which is an extensive physical alteration of the female genitals and known to cause serious health issues. FGM is intended to promote chastity and fidelity among women by

reducing or eliminating female sexual pleasure. In contrast, Rwandans perform a genital modification that is intended to promote both male and female sexual pleasure. Most Rwandan females view this modification as an attractive improvement.

**Female Education:** Female education historically has not been a priority in Rwanda. Following independence, for example, less than 15% of secondary schools admitted girls. After the genocide, many orphaned girls were forced to assume head of household duties and care for younger siblings, which prevented them from attending school. The government established several programs to address this problem and motivate girls to attend school. While these programs have proven effective, many girls are still needed at home, resulting in lower attendance and higher drop-out rates.

### Homosexuality in Rwanda

Rwanda does not criminalize homosexuality. At this time, the US State Department has a Status of Forces Agreement in place for Rwanda. Service members will be held accountable to the Uniformed Code of Military Justice.

### Gender and Politics

A few female political players were prominent in Rwanda before the genocide. Most notable were Agathe Habyarimana, the former first lady who controlled a powerful political clique instrumental in planning the genocide, and Agathe Uwilingimana, the Hutu Prime Minister killed in the genocide. Today, women are participating in politics in unprecedented numbers, aided by a constitutional mandate to reserve seats for



women in the Chamber of Deputies (see *Political and Social Relations*).

The Rwandan Patriotic Front's (RPF) gender equity program has aided women in obtaining positions in all three branches of government and instituted an electoral system that reserves 30% of the seats in all public decision-making bodies for women. While women constitute over 50% of Rwanda's Parliament today, these political opportunities have primarily benefitted the small minority of urban educated women.

## 6. LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION

### Languages

Having four official languages (Kinyarwanda, French, English, and Swahili), Rwanda is unusual in Africa for its lack of ethnic linguistic diversity – Hutu, Tutsi, and Twa (see p.7-8 of *Political and Social Relations*) all speak Kinyarwanda as their native tongue. Limited use of French and English primarily occurs in official contexts such as education, business, and government.



**Kinyarwanda:** Nearly every Rwandan speaks Kinyarwanda, a Bantu language from a sub-branch of the Niger-Congo language group that is written in the Latin alphabet. Kinyarwanda is a tonal language, meaning that the tone of speech can affect its meaning. Kinyarwanda is mutually intelligible with Kirundi, the national language of Burundi, and the two languages are sometimes considered dialects of a single language known as Rwanda-Rundi. Kinyarwanda is also closely related to Mashi, spoken in the South Kivu region of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), and Kiha, spoken in northwestern Tanzania. Kinyarwanda is a language of instruction in primary school (see p.2 of *Learning and Knowledge*).

**French:** French was introduced to Rwanda during the Belgian colonial rule (see p.3-4 of *History and Myth*), remaining the language of choice among Rwanda's educated elite for many years. Since the genocide, English has steadily replaced French as the language of business, government, and education. Some commentators have speculated that this shift may partially stem from troubled diplomatic relations between France and the ruling Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) (see p.6 of *Political and Social Relations*). Similarly, the language shift may be due to the influence of English-speaking Pentecostal missionaries who have proliferated Rwanda since the genocide.

**English:** Although Rwanda is traditionally considered part of French-speaking Africa, neighboring countries such as Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda are former British colonies. Consequently, the use of English spread into Rwanda when the RPF took power following the genocide (see p.8 of *History and Myth*). Since many of the RPF's top leaders had spent their entire lives in Uganda, they learned English instead of French. Although the official policy of the RPF government is to promote English and French equally, Rwanda has moved steadily closer to the English-speaking world: in 1995, English was made an official language; in 2008, English replaced French as the second language of instruction in Rwanda's schools (see p.2 of *Learning and Knowledge*); and, in 2009, Rwanda joined the Commonwealth of Nations, an international organization composed almost entirely of former British colonies. The official reason for these changes is to promote fuller integration into the global economy and the mostly English-speaking East African Community (EAC).



**Swahili:** Swahili is the vernacular language in many surrounding countries. Although Swahili is now an official language in Rwanda, it is spoken by those engaged in regional trade, particularly the Muslim minority. Kinyarwanda includes many Swahili loanwords.



### **Communication Style**

Rwandans are known to be subtle and modest in their speech and usually address controversial or potentially sensitive topics indirectly. Rwandans may even withhold solicited feedback if they suspect the response could be offensive. Rwandans generally avoid direct confrontation, so disagreements tend to be resolved through third parties or calm, deliberate discussion.

While this indirect style can pose a challenge for foreign nationals working with Rwandans, there are basic guidelines for enhancing communication. When giving feedback, state criticisms generally and address them to the group at large rather than pinpointing an individual. When seeking feedback, ask for general opinions about the organizational environment or a certain project in order to generate open discussion without reprisal. When negotiating, prepare to debate more extensively and to progress more slowly (see p.3 of *Time and Space*).

### Place Names and Pronunciation

Most Kinyarwanda words are pronounced phonetically, meaning they are spoken just as they are written. There are occasional regional variations which can make interpretation difficult. For example:

- An initial *k* pronounced as *ch*
- An initial *cy* pronounced as *sh*
- *j* substituted for *g*
- *r* and *l* used interchangeably

You might hear the capital city of Kigali referred to as “Chigari,” the port city of Cyangugu referred to as “Shangugu,” or the northwestern city of Kinigi referred to as “Kiniji.” In addition, the French suffix *-ville* is sometimes added to the end of a city name in order to distinguish it from a broader region with the same name. Therefore, a share-taxi driver (see *Technology and Material*) may pronounce the stop in downtown Kigali as “Chigariville.”

### Greetings

Greetings are considered essential social graces in Rwandan culture, and it is considered rude to rush, skip, or fail to return a greeting. The most common type of greeting is the handshake, an important sign of respect which initiates nearly every conversation (see p.1 of *Time and Space*). Rwandans may also briefly embrace close friends whom they have not seen in a while. The most common verbal greeting is *Muraho* (“Hello”).

Other greetings include *Mwaramutse* (“Good morning”) and *Mwiriwe* (“Good afternoon”). These greetings are often followed by the question *Amakuru?* (“How’s the news?”), which in turn is usually answered with a simple *Ni meza* (“Fine”).

## Titles

When addressing superiors or new acquaintances, Rwandans use formal modes of address such as *Monsieur*, *Madame*, and *vous* (the French formal form of “you”). If applicable, titles such as *Father*, *Director*, *Sergeant*, or *Captain* are also used. Rwandans address elders with the respectful titles *umusaza* or *umuzee* (old man) or *umukechuru* (old woman). With close friends or acquaintances Rwandans use first names, nicknames, occupational titles, or even familial roles. Rwandans are typically given two names shortly after birth (see p.3 of *Family and Kinship*). Thus, relatives often do not share a last name, and Rwandans who do share a last name are not necessarily related.



## Conversational Topics

**Safe:** Rwandans usually limit discussions to uncontroversial, general-interest topics when speaking with a person they do not know well. Foreign nationals should try to confine their conversations to these sorts of topics, which include sports, weather, and Rwanda’s beautiful landscape.

**Handle with Care:** Some topics are very likely to carry social sensitivities, particularly when discussed with outsiders, and therefore require tactful diplomacy. A prime example is family: visitors will likely be asked basic questions about their spouses and children. Although it is socially acceptable to ask the same questions in return, you should remember that many Rwandan families were destroyed during the genocide. Asking Rwandans even basic family questions may provoke extremely painful memories they may prefer not to discuss. Similarly, it is considered suspicious behavior to ask detailed questions about an acquaintance’s personal life. As a precaution, it is best that you avoid inquiring about a Rwandan’s family. Another example



is religion: because Rwandans tend to be devout (see p.1 of *Religion and Spirituality*), you can expect to be asked about your religious affiliation. In these situations, it is usually best to be vague and diplomatic.

**Taboo: Never ask a Rwandan about ethnicity!** It is considered inappropriate to inquire about a Rwandan's ethnicity. In some circumstances, it could be illegal: according to Rwanda's constitution, "Propagation of ethnic, regional, racial, or discrimination of any other form of division is punishable by law." It is also inappropriate to talk about war or politics. In recent history, some Rwandans were killed for expressing views on war or politics; therefore, it is not surprising that many prefer to keep their views private. Finally, Rwandan modesty dictates that sex not be discussed publicly.

## Gestures

**Pointing:** It is considered impolite to point using the hand or finger. Instead, the chin and mouth should be extended in the appropriate direction.

**Emphasis:** Rwandans often emphasize a point by quickly brushing the hands together a single time.

**Disbelief:** Rwandans express disbelief by turning their heads to the side and saying, "Eh." This gesture can also mean dismissal.

## Visits

Informal, impromptu visits to a friend's or neighbor's home are both common and expected in Rwanda. These visits begin with extended greetings and continue with light refreshments and social time. The host usually presents the guest with bottled soda or beer, only removing the bottle cap in the presence of the guest. If the visit marks a special occasion, the guest may reciprocate the host's hospitality with a gift of beer or food. It is customary for the entire family to engage in conversation with the guest. These exchanges are viewed as open-ended discussions that will be resumed at the next visit. Once the conversation has been "postponed," the host will escort the guest to the road.



## Rwandan Translations

English	Kinyarwanda	French	Swahili
Do you speak English?	Mbese uvuga icyungereza?	Parlez-vous anglais?	Unasema kiingereza?
Hello	Muraho	Bonjour	Hujambo
How are you?	Amakuru?	Comment allez-vous?	Habari yako?
I am fine	Ni meza	Bien	Mzuri/Nzuri
Yes	Yee/Yego	Oui	Ndiyo/Nnh
No	Oya	Non	Hapana
OK	Sawa	Bien	Haya
Good day (AM)	Mwaramutse	Bonjour	Habari ya asubuhi
Good day (PM)	Mwiriwe	Bonsoir	Habari ya mchana
Goodbye (AM)	Mwirirwe	Au revoir	Tutaonana
Goodbye (PM)	Muramuke	Au revoir	Tutaonana
Please	Nyabuneka	S'il vous plaît	Tafadhali
Thank you	Urakoze	Merci	Asante
You are welcome	Murakaza neza	De rien	Karibu
Sorry	Mbabarira	Désolé/Excusez-moi	Pole
Today	Uyu munsi	Aujourd'hui	Leo
Tomorrow	Ejo	Demain	Kesho
What is your name?	Witwa nde?	Comment vous appelez vous?	Jina lako ni nani?
My name is __	Nitwa __	Je m'appelle __	Jina langu ni __
I am pleased to meet you	Ndishimye kubamenya	Enchanté	Nimefurahi kukutana nawe
Who?	Inde?/Ni nde?	Qui?	Nani?
What?	Iki?	Quoi?	Nini?
When?	Ryari?	Quand?	Lini?
Where?	Hehe?	Où?	Wapi?
Why?	Kuki?/Kubera iki?	Pourquoi?	Kwani/Kwa nini?
How much does it cost?	Bigura angahe?	Quel est le prix?	Kiasi gani?
How far?	Kure kungana iki?	Comment est loin?	Jinsi mbali?
Calm down	Tuza/Gira ituze	Calmer	Tulia
Help!	Mfasha	Au secours!	Msaada!
Stop!	Hagarara	Arrêtez!	Simama!

## 7. LEARNING AND KNOWLEDGE

### Literacy

- Total population over age 15 who can read and write: 78.8%
- Male: 81.0%
- Female: 76.7% (2022 estimate)

### Traditional Education

Prior to colonialism the mother was primarily responsible for early childhood education, although some children received instruction in specified skills such as metal-working and basket-making through more formal training programs and apprenticeships. History, traditions, and laws were preserved and taught to children through chants, myths, poems, proverbs, and songs (see p.2 of *History and Myth*). The sons of chiefs were trained in martial arts and court etiquette and learned to perform *Intore*, which is Rwanda's traditional Ballet and a by-product of Belgian colonial rule, at the royal court.

### Formal Education

The Catholic Church provided the first formal education in Rwanda focusing on teaching a few students to read and write religious texts and training future priests. In the 1930s the Catholic Church assumed responsibility for all schooling in the country and began to offer instruction in other subjects such as agriculture and administration.



During this period, the Belgians assigned an ethnic identity to everyone based on physical measurements and issued identity cards (see p.3 of *History and Myth*). Educational opportunities were largely reserved for those identified as Tutsi, who were generally regarded as more deserving of education due to their social and political dominance in society.

A 1948 UN mission to assess Belgian efforts in preparing the colony for independence strongly condemned this bias. This public pressure, along with the Church's growing distrust of Tutsi

leaders who were pushing for independence (see p.3 of *Religion and Spirituality*), led many Church missions to shift their focus to the Hutu.

By the late 1950s, the Catholic Church was vocally pro-Hutu, and the Belgian administration switched its support to the Hutu ostensibly to remedy past injustices. After independence in 1962, ethnic and regional quotas were introduced and, in 1973, Tutsi were virtually purged from many schools. A few years later the government sponsored educational reforms that espoused “Rwandanization” and the increased use of Kinyarwanda in schools, although these efforts were short-lived and had little effect.

Since the genocide, the Rwandan government has made equitable access to education its mission, attempting to install an educational system free of discrimination and respectful of human rights.

### **Present-Day Primary and Secondary Schools**

Rwanda’s public education system includes 6 years of primary school, 3 years of lower secondary school, and 3 years of upper secondary school. To gain admittance to an upper secondary school, students must pass a comprehensive entrance examination.



While public education is free, expenses for required supplies and uniforms make attendance cost-prohibitive for some families. There are also private, fee-charging schools, many of which are

run by Protestant and Catholic churches. Kinyarwanda is the language of instruction in primary schools, while English and French are used at secondary and post-secondary schools. The government pledged to provide all children under age 10 with basic education by 2015. Rwanda’s net primary enrollment rate is now 99% while upper secondary enrollment is 62%.

### **Post-Secondary Schools**

There are 11 public institutions of higher learning in Rwanda,

including the National University of Rwanda in Butare and institutes for finance, science and technology, education, and health in Kigali. While admission to these institutions is highly competitive, the quality of education also is considered impressive despite a lack of resources. Additionally, there are 23 private institutions of higher learning in Rwanda.

## Recent Challenges and Changes in the System

**History Instruction:** As noted earlier, a pattern of unequal access to education was fundamentally linked to notions of ethnic identity during the colonial period. After independence, members of the Hutu government instituted a policy favoring children from their regions of the country, with both Tutsi and Hutu from other regions severely disadvantaged in having access to education. Almost all Rwandans have grown up with distortions of history that were exploited by one group or the other for political purposes.



Educators in Rwanda today confront the challenge of teaching history without bias, which is an explicit part of the government's social reconstruction plan. There was a moratorium on teaching history for over a decade after the genocide, although the Rwandan government today claims to be committed to the difficult task of accurately presenting colonial and post-colonial events in order to promote a unified Rwandan identity.

However, political constraints inhibit free discussion of Rwanda's past. One recent effort is *Itorero ry'Igihugu*, an intensive 20-day civic education program for those completing the 12th grade. It offers lessons in Rwandan history, the national development plan, gender-specific topics, and students' role in development. It is in effect illegal to inquire about anything having to do with state-sponsored violence or the genocide/civil war. It is best that outsiders avoid these issues.

**Switch from French to English:** Although early missionaries

translated some biblical texts and hymns into Kinyarwanda, French became the primary language of educational instruction when the Belgian clergy founded the first formal educational institutions. However, in 2008, the government announced that the entire educational system would eventually drop French completely, leaving English and Kinyarwanda as the official languages of instruction. With this move, the government intends to strengthen its ties to English-speaking east African neighbors and improve its position in international commerce (see p.1-2 of *Language & Communication*).

In 2011, the Rwandan government proposed that the first three years of primary school be taught in Kinyarwanda with English language instruction beginning at year four. However, in 2019, English became the primary language for instruction beginning at the first year of primary school. This ambitious approach poses a challenge to the government: as of 2024, only 4% of teachers have intermediate to advanced knowledge of English.

### ***One Laptop Per Child***

From 2008-2020, Rwanda participated in the *One Laptop per Child* program, having completed a pilot program in which 20,000 laptops were distributed to schoolchildren. By 2020, over 328,192 laptops had been deployed to more than 930 schools across the country falling short of the goal to provide each of Rwanda's 2.5 million children with a laptop. Participation in this program was part of the government's ambitious plan to make Rwanda a technology and services hub in East Africa. By providing electricity and internet access to those schools having laptops, the government hoped to provide access to global information throughout the surrounding communities. In addition, the implementation of English-language computers was intended to aid in the transition from French to English as the primary language of instruction.

## 8. TIME AND SPACE

### Concept of Time and Space

Rwandans view the body as a unified whole that is intimately connected with an environment filled with forces and symbols. All bodily movements are therefore intertwined with language, memory, and tradition.

For Rwandans, the body has a “vital center” located near the navel, with “planes” in the body forming the basis of “correct gestures” for all situations. These gestures are fundamental to how Rwandans experience time and space and can be observed in all aspects of Rwandan life, from walking and gesticulating to dancing and manual labor. Rwandan children learn these gestures very early, absorbing rhythms of speech and movement while spending several months after birth strapped to their mother’s back.



### Handshakes

Every conversation begins with a handshake. It is common courtesy to shake hands with every person upon entering a room, even when not talking directly with each of them. To convey particular respect, you should grasp your right forearm



with your left hand while shaking hands. This elaborate type of handshake is usually used with elders or when presenting an item such as a business card.

### Eye Contact

Prolonged eye contact can sometimes be interpreted as impolite or insubordinate behavior. If eye contact is established inadvertently, individuals are often quick to look away. It is best to avoid initiating or sustaining eye contact with individuals who merit particular respect, such as superiors.

## Personal Space

Personal space in Rwanda depends upon the familiarity of the people involved in the interaction. A Rwandan may show discomfort if a casual acquaintance stands closer than an arm's length during conversation. However, this distance may be considerably shorter when close friends or family converse. Similarly, it is common for close friends to hold hands during conversation, particularly when walking together. Although you will often see this behavior in males and occasionally in females, it is rarely practiced between people of opposite sexes. Physical contact is also an important part of greetings: close friends or family members often greet one another with a hug or, when greeting a woman, a kiss on the cheek.



## Photographs

Rwandans generally value their privacy and expect outsiders to be respectful. It is always advisable to ask permission to photograph local citizens. Also, note that taking photos near Kigali Prison, located on Avenue de la Justice opposite Rue de l'Epargne, is strictly prohibited.



## Rwandan Work Week

The Rwandan work week extends from Monday to Friday, with business hours from 8:00am to 12:30pm and 1:30pm to 5:00pm. Banks maintain a slightly different schedule

of 8:00am – 12:00pm and 2:00pm – 6:00pm during the week and 8:00am – 1:00pm on Saturday. These schedules may change slightly in the future due to a 2009 labor law increasing the maximum workweek to 45 hours from 40. For National Holidays, see p.4 of *Aesthetics and Recreation*.

## Business Etiquette and Punctuality

Rwandans tend to take a relaxed view of time management, believing that there will always be time tomorrow for tasks which



are not completed today. Deadlines are flexible and frequently extended, and for those that cannot be extended, Rwandans are often willing to work after hours to complete work on time. This understanding of time management does not extend to foreign nationals, who are generally expected to work in a timely fashion. In general, absenteeism is not acceptable except in the case of emergencies, such as sickness, or family events, such as weddings or family illness.

### Negotiations

Negotiating in Rwanda is similar to negotiating in the US and is largely based on reaching a mutually beneficial agreement through respectful discussion. Rwandans are willing to agree to almost any terms in a negotiations setting, particularly if it involves avoiding confrontation and protecting one's honor. Foreign nationals should be mindful that a Rwandan may not follow through on an agreement exactly as promised – in a word, be prepared for compromise.

- Rwandans have a very flexible view of time, so negotiations should never be rushed.
- Discuss disagreements in a calm, diplomatic manner and never involve shouting or anger.
- In the marketplace, foreign nationals should expect to pay a markup of 20-100%.
  - Vendors generally charge white people, known as **muzungu** (*abazungu*, plural) in Kinyarwanda, a higher price for most items because they believe that white people can afford to pay more.
- However, there is often room for bargaining – give yourself some room to make concessions. A Rwandan usually would expect you to bargain hard, and failing to do so could risk your losing his respect.

## 9. AESTHETICS AND RECREATION

### Overview of Aesthetics and Recreation

There is an old Kinyarwanda proverb which says, “Tragedy doesn’t go away, but it doesn’t remain forever.” This statement neatly describes the role of aesthetics and recreation in post-genocide Rwanda. The events and emotions of the genocide are being captured for future generations in artworks attempting to make sense of the tragedy. Similarly, a new and more unified society is emerging from the sense of community created by sports, games, and performing arts.

### Dress

Rwandans wear a variety of traditional and Western styles, which they frequently combine in a single outfit. This fusion often results in unconventional outfits featuring bright colors and loud patterns. Proud of a presentable public appearance, Rwandans rarely wear dusty, unpolished shoes or wrinkled, soiled shirts.



Since the majority of Rwandans are farmers (see p.1-2 of *Economics and Resources*), work attire is generally a t-shirt paired with shorts, pants, or a skirt. Even modest garments are extremely expensive for the average Rwandan, so it is common to see the rural poor walking barefoot in worn Western-donated clothing. The government has introduced legislation intended to eliminate these outward signs of poverty by requiring citizens to wear shoes and intact clothing. Strict enforcement of this law often means that poor Rwandans are effectively banned from public buildings and marketplaces.

### Special Occasions

**Men:** For special occasions, men typically wear a fedora hat or special head wrap. Men are also occasionally seen wearing a **boubou**, a West African ensemble consisting of a loose, long shirt worn over embroidered trousers. Older men, particularly in rural areas, may still wear a traditional white wrap-around kilt.

**Women:** Women often wear a dress cut from *igitenge*, a colorful and elaborately patterned fabric, or a *pagne*, a type of wraparound skirt. Mothers wear a headband symbolizing motherhood.

### Sports and Games

The most popular sports and games are soccer, basketball, volleyball, chess, cycling, cricket, and tennis.

**Soccer:** Introduced by missionaries in the late 19th century, soccer is extremely popular in Rwanda and throughout Africa. Children fashion soccer balls from plastic bags or banana leaves and twine, while adults watch televised soccer matches in social



settings. The most popular soccer teams are Kiyovu Sportif, Rayon Sport, and the Rwandan Patriotic Army. Rwandan soccer fans are well known in Africa for their devotion, exceedingly enthusiastic cheers, chants, and toasts. For

example, after the Rwandan national team defeated Uganda in 2004, 10,000 fans greeted the victors at the airport, escorting them to the national stadium for a victory celebration.

**Igisoro:** Rwandans of all ages play *igisoro*, a traditional, two-player board game. Players try to capture each other's seeds, which symbolize cows, on a board with 32 pits.

### Dance and Theater

Rwandan dance and theater are highly refined art forms with a long history of ties to the political and military establishment. In the pre-colonial era, royal courts used the performing arts to promote their own legitimacy and underscore their military power. For example, in the Nyiginya Kingdom (see p.2 of *History and Myth*), young men known as *Intore* dancers were specially trained to perform highly symbolic dances that represented the supremacy of the ruling family. The Hutu Power regime instituted a similar ritual known as *animation* that required farmers to sing songs praising the state and its rulers.

In the years since the genocide, the performing arts have become a powerful tool for national reconciliation. Dance and theater groups have emerged across the country, providing a stimulus for genocide perpetrators and victims to rebuild their communities. One government official compares this broad participation in performing arts to ***Kugangahura***, a traditional ritual where people cleanse themselves following a bad event.

## Music

**Traditional:** Like dance and theater, traditional Rwandan music was significant in pre-colonial royal courts. Court musicians used instruments such as the ***ingoma*** (drum), ***unwirongi*** (pipes), ***inanga*** (lyre), and ***kalimba*** (thumb



piano) to play ***ikinimba***, songs which praised heroes and kings. Although many traditional musicians were driven out of Rwanda during the genocide, traditional music is currently experiencing a rebirth due to active government support and the popular music of artists like Jean Paul Samputu.

**Popular:** Rwanda first developed its own modern pop music after independence in 1962 (see p.5 of *History and Myth*). Following the lead of Zairian bands playing in Kigali on regional tours, Rwandan bands adopted the style of ***soukous*** (African rumba), later mixing it with Caribbean zouk and reggae. These influences persist in modern Rwandan pop, which also borrows from American genres like rock, hip hop, and R&B. One example of this mix is guitarist Aimé Murefu, a popular emerging artist whose music is clearly influenced by B.B. King, Jimi Hendrix, and Carlos Santana. Just like the traditional musicians, many pop musicians fled Rwanda to escape years of war and genocide. The best known of these artists is Cécile Kayirebwa, who sings evocative songs about Rwanda which incorporate elements of Gregorian chants and traditional Rwandan music.

**Music and the Genocide:** The broadcasts of RTL (Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines) played a key role in propagating Hutu ideology during the genocide. The anti-Tutsi music of Simon Bikindi became popular among the

**Interahamwe**, a paramilitary death squad (see p.6-7 of *History and Myth*). In 2008, Bikindi was sentenced to 15 years in prison for incitement to commit genocide.

### Literature

Although little Kinyarwanda literature exists, several notable Rwandan authors have written in French. The best known is Alexis Kagame, a philosopher and historian who wrote extensively about Rwandan culture. Another famous Rwandan author is Yolande Mukagasana, a genocide survivor who moved to Europe and wrote two novels about her experiences. Saverio Nyigiziki also gained wide acclaim for his writings, which include an autobiography and a novel.

### Hotel Rwanda

The most famous big screen portrayal of Rwanda is the 2004 film *Hotel Rwanda*, which tells the story of Paul Rusesabagina, a Hutu hotel manager who sheltered hundreds of Tutsi during the height of the genocide. Although Rusesabagina has been hailed as a hero in the West, he remains a controversial figure at home, because of his criticism of the Kagame regime. Rwandan authorities have criticized him from profiting from the genocide and have accused him of funding a rebel group.

### National Holidays

- January 1: New Year's Day
- February 1: Heroes' Day
- March 8: Women's Day
- March: – April: Good Friday
- April 7: Genocide Memorial Day
- May 1: Labor Day
- July 1: Independence Day
- July 4: Liberation Day
- August 15: August Assumption
- October 1: Patriotism Day
- December 25: Christmas
- December 26: Boxing Day

## Arts and Crafts

Rwandans produce a wide variety of traditional handmade goods, including pottery, wood carvings, clay statues, jewelry, instruments, baskets, and woven textiles.

**Twa Pottery:** The Twa ethnic group (see p.7-8 of *Political and Social Relations*) produce pottery famous for its durability and clean design. In recent years, cheap industrial substitutes and limited raw materials have made Twa pottery increasingly uneconomical. Nevertheless, pottery production remains an important means for the traditionally marginalized Twa to interact with broader Rwandan society.



**Imigongo:** Since the late 18th century, Rwandans have decorated their homes with *imigongo*, a type of geometric painting made using cow dung and wooden plates. Although imigongo almost disappeared after independence, it has been revived recently through the work of women's cooperatives.

**Congolese Wooden Sculpture:** Congolese wooden sculptures, a staple in Rwandan marketplaces, generally belong to one of two genres. The first genre depicts "traditional African culture" and caters mainly to tourists, while the second genre depicts scenes of repression from the colonial era and provides commentary on colonial and contemporary politics.

**Art and the Genocide:** In the years since 1994, the government has constructed a network of memorials and museums and sponsored works depicting the horrors of the genocide. These works range from the highly polished artworks featured in tourist areas to the gruesome displays of human remains found in churches and schools throughout the countryside. The **Kigali Memorial Centre**, constructed at a site where over 250,000 victims are buried, houses a permanent exhibition of the genocide.

## 10. SUSTENANCE AND HEALTH

### Diet

Rwandans consume most of their daily calories from a core group of foodstuffs including bananas, plantains, sweet potatoes, corn, beans, sorghum, and cassava. A starchy root vegetable common throughout Africa, cassava is a staple that can be eaten raw or processed into chips or a powdery starch used to make bread. The traditional reliance on fruits and vegetables for sustenance often results in serious protein deficiency, as most Rwandans can afford meat only for special occasions and celebrations.

### Common Dishes

A popular dish is **ugali**, a thick cornmeal paste that is either eaten alone or is used to make a corn porridge **uji**. Also popular is **fufu**, which is a thick paste usually made by boiling starchy root vegetables in water and pounding to the desired consistency. **Ubugali**, a porridge made of cassava, is often eaten with stew. A common bread is a type of flatbread called **chapati**.



Food was traditionally consumed in public only during ceremonies and rituals. However, this practice has

changed in recent times, and restaurants serving both Rwandan and Western fare are found across the country.

Cafeteria-style restaurants are popular and usually serve meat kebabs, tilapia, and meat or bean stews accompanied by **ubugali**, **matooke** (cooked banana or plantain), boiled potatoes, rice, or French fries. Many towns also offer sit-down restaurants with a variety of cuisine including Chinese, French, Italian, and Indian. American-style hamburgers and pizza are available at fast-food restaurants, and street vendors sell roasted corn and **mandazzi**, sweet or spicy doughnuts.

American soft drinks, bottled water, and locally produced fruit juice are widely available. Although coffee beans have become

a major export crop, the coffee served in Rwandan restaurants is often of the instant variety. The most popular beverage in Rwanda is *icyayi* (tea) in which water, milk, sugar, and tea are boiled together to result in a very hot, very sweet and sticky drink. The most common alcoholic beverage is locally brewed beer (sold under the brand names *Primus* and *Mutzig*) *urwagwa*, a locally brewed banana beer, and whiskey.

### Food Scarcity

Although over 70% of the population is engaged in subsistence agriculture, Rwanda does not produce enough food for its people. Much of its arable land has been subject to deforestation and over-cultivation. Rwanda must import food and is heavily dependent on foreign aid (see p.3 of *Economics and Resources*).

### Rwandan Coffee

Coffee was introduced to Rwanda in the early 20th century by German missionaries, and by the 1930s it was a significant source of income for rural families. Until the 1990s, cultivation was performed primarily by small land-holders following non-standardized production methods. Since the genocide, coffee has played an important role in the stabilization and rehabilitation of the economy (see *Economics & Resources*). Both private investors and aid agencies have supported the National University of Rwanda in developing all aspects of the industry. About 450,000 small-scale farmers grow coffee today in the western part of the country near Kigali. *Bourbon Coffee*, a coffee house featuring only Rwandan coffee, has several shops in Kigali and branches in Washington and New York.

### Food Customs

Both dairy products and alcoholic beverages such as honeyed sorghum beer were centerpieces during royal rituals of ancient Rwanda (see p.1 of *History and Myth*). The symbolic conferring



of gifts of food to relatives and friends during social and religious ceremonies continues to be important today. For example, at a wedding or funeral, guests may be served a small piece of meat and some roasted potato. A pot of sorghum beer with several straws may be placed in the center of the room to be shared and calabashes of banana beer may be passed around. Similarly, beer consumed from a shared gourd is considered an honor in rural homes when offered by the male head-of-household.

Rwandans will customarily serve refreshments to guests in their homes, and refusing to accept their generosity is considered a grave insult. Guests are usually given the first choice of food and drink, although hosts may first taste items in the presence of their guests to indicate food safety. Similarly, hosts may present guests food items as gifts upon their departure.

### **Rwandan View of Health and Wellbeing**

For the inhabitants of pre-colonial Rwanda, the cosmological and social orders were naturally intertwined. Political and social stability were seen as dependent on the king's (and his ritual specialists') fulfillment of divinely ordained rituals that kept production, consumption, and fertility in motion.



Both the health of the body and the well-being of society in general were conceptualized through notions of flow and blockage of fluids. By managing the flow of milk,

honey, rain, and blood; the king and his ritual specialists insured the health and fertility of the people, their land, their cattle, and society in general.

This cosmology gives insight into how Rwandans think about their bodies and their well-being today. Rwandans regard health and disease not as bodily conditions alone, but rather as states of social integration and disintegration. Liquids and bodily secretions are important symbols that express and produce relationships and states of being. The transfer of liquids between the self and other (breast milk from mother to child, or a drink from host to visitor) produce, and reproduce, social relations.

Since continuously exchanging fluids maintains social harmony, obstructing any flow of bodily fluids is considered unnatural. These ideas are reflected throughout Rwandan culture today and help to explain the importance of drinks in rituals and as gifts, the reluctance to impede the exchange of bodily fluids through the use of contraception (see p.3-4 of *Family and Kinship*) among other beliefs and practices.

### Overview of Health Challenges

Following the war and genocide of 1994, which left approximately one million dead and much of the country destroyed (see p.6-7 of *History & Myth*), Rwanda has made notable improvements in healthcare. For example, Rwanda offers a universal health insurance, with HIV/AIDS treatment reaching almost all eligible patients.

However, serious health challenges remain. Having the 2nd highest population density in Africa, Rwanda's population is expected to increase from 13.6 million today to 15 million by 2028 with almost 40% of the population living in poverty.

Each woman bears an average of 3-4 children, with an infant mortality rate of 25 per 1,000 live births and an estimated 8% of all Rwandan children underweight.

The entire population is at risk for malaria, and poor sanitation and a lack of clean drinking water aggravate the effects of disease. In 2024, life expectancy at birth was 65 for males and 69 for females.



Other challenges to the health care system include natural disasters, such as volcanic eruptions and floods, and the ongoing effects of conflict, such as the 2006 return of 84,000 Rwandans from Burundi and Tanzania. Mental health problems directly resulting from the events surrounding the genocide have spurred the government to invest in an expansion of mental health care facilities.

## Communicable Diseases

Accounting for 38% of deaths, the most common communicable diseases are malaria and HIV/AIDS, followed by respiratory infections, diarrhea, tuberculosis, typhus, cholera, measles, and meningitis.

In the early years of the AIDS epidemic, over 17% of Rwanda's urban population was HIV positive. During the genocide, thousands of women contracted HIV as a result of systematic sexual violence and rape: it is

estimated that 70% of women who were raped contracted HIV/AIDS. Since that time, the overall national HIV/AIDS prevalence rate has fallen to approximately 2.3%.



## Healthcare System

While Rwanda suffers from a severe shortage of medical personnel, fortunately, there are over 1700 health posts throughout the country, with 75% of the population living within 3 miles of a facility. A majority of healthcare across Rwanda's 15,000 villages is delivered by a network of 45,000 Community Health Workers. Currently, there are 42 district hospitals, 5 national hospitals, and 500 health centers. Kigali's 2 main hospitals are much better supplied than those found elsewhere in the country. Most Rwandans receive healthcare at small clinics which vary greatly in quality and resources. Over 84% of the population is covered by health insurance.

**Other Healing Practices:** Traditional medicine remains the preferred choice for about 70% of the rural population. Such service is much less expensive, and healers often accept bartered goods as payment. The Ministry of Health is presently working with healers to regulate traditional medicine, organize healers into associations for better supervision and oversight, and research the indigenous plants used in traditional medicine.

## 11. ECONOMICS AND RESOURCES

### Economic Overview

Rwanda is small, landlocked, and has few natural resources. As a result, the country historically has had very little income to invest in infrastructure and human capital development. Instead, the economy remains overwhelmingly dependent upon agriculture, which accounts for nearly 27% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and employs 56% of Rwanda's labor force. Rwanda is especially dependent upon coffee and tea production, leaving the economy highly vulnerable to bad weather and price fluctuations.

Despite these impediments, Rwanda's economy has experienced a remarkable turnaround since 1994, with an average annual growth rate of 8%. However, this growth has done little to help the poor: 40% of Rwandans still live at or below the national poverty line. This imbalance between economic growth and poverty reduction largely is a result of widening income inequality, especially between increasingly rich urban professionals and persistently poor rural subsistence farmers.

### Natural Resources

Rwanda's primary natural resource is its exceptionally fertile land, with about 81% of Rwanda's land being agricultural and 14% being permanent cropland. Major



cash crops include coffee, tea, bananas, sweet potatoes, cassava, beans, sorghum, and corn. Another non-food cash crop is chrysanthemums, which are used to make an insecticide called pyrethrum.

In addition to land, Rwanda has limited mineral deposits, including gold, tin ore, tungsten ore, and coltan (a dull black metallic mineral whose extracts are used to manufacture electronic capacitors). However, international groups have questioned the legality of Rwanda's mineral export industry. In a 2009 report, the group Global Witness accused Rwanda of re-

exporting minerals extracted illegally in the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). These minerals, which are needed to manufacture a variety of consumer electronics, generate huge profits used to fund ongoing civil war in the DRC. Conversely, wars often occur because groups are trying to control the extraction of various minerals, a substantial volume of which are exported through Rwanda.

### **Subsistence Farming and Land Policy**

In the pre-colonial era, there were two different systems of land tenure. Under **ubukonde**, land rights fell to the first clan that settled a given area, while under **igikingi**, land rights transferred from the king to regional chiefs and then to farmers. During the colonial era, Belgian authorities declared that all unsettled lands were available to foreigners.



Today, Rwanda's countryside is characterized by small, densely-scattered farms

unsuitable for agro-business and often inadequate to feed even a single family. This situation has worsened with a growing shortage of arable land resulting from rapid population growth, return of refugees, soil depletion, deforestation, and lingering environmental impact of past wars.

### **Other Industries**

In addition to agriculture and mining, Rwanda has a services sector which includes tourism, financial services, and government activities among others and manufacturing industries, which jointly account for about 73% of GDP. Due in part to government efforts, tourism to Rwanda's national parks has grown rapidly in recent years, generating \$620 million revenues in 2023. On the downside, the gorilla population is endangered and not stable, while the national parks in the east are largely void of large animals. Manufacturing is largely limited to cement, import substitutes, and small-scale food and beverage production.

### **Currency, Money, and Banking**

The currency of Rwanda is the Rwandan franc (RWF), which is subdivided into 100 centimes and denoted by a variety of

symbols, including Rfr, Rwf, Frw, and RF. Although the exchange rate fluctuates, recently US\$1 has been worth about RWF 1,189. The Rwandan franc is issued in 6 coins (1, 5, 10, 20, 50, 100 denominations) and 4 banknotes (500, 1,000, 2,000, 5,000 denominations). Credit and debit cards and traveler's checks are generally useful only at banks and high-end merchants in Kigali, so visitors should plan on using Rwandan cash. Rwanda's central bank, the National Bank of Rwanda, oversees the country's banking sector comprised of 16 commercial banks, 18 microfinance banks, which is the provision of banking to the poor, a development bank, and a cooperative bank.



### Foreign Trade

Rwanda's predominant trading partner is China, which accounts for 19% of Rwanda's \$5.78 billion worth of imports. Other important import partners include Tanzania (11%), the UAE (10%), and India (7%). Rwanda exports roughly \$3.51 billion in goods to the UAE (32%), the DRC (25%), and Thailand (5%). Rwanda mainly exports gold, tin, coffee, and petroleum.

### Foreign Aid

In 2022, Rwanda received \$1.077 billion in foreign aid. The International Development Association was the largest donor in 2020-2021 with an average of \$409 million, followed by the US at \$174 million. In 2022, the US provided \$205.9 in assistance. On average, grants (13%) and loans (24%) account for 37% of Rwanda's national budget, the remaining 63% is generated from domestic revenue.

### Standards of Wealth

Since land has always been closely tied to economic and political power (see p.1 of *History and Myth*), land holdings are a traditional standard of wealth. Cattle, a symbol intimately related to large land holdings (see p.9 of *Political and Social Relations*), are also an important symbol of wealth. The recent emergence of a significant money economy has elevated luxury goods such as televisions and automobiles into important status symbols.

## 12. TECHNOLOGY AND MATERIAL

### Technology Overview

Technologically underdeveloped, Rwanda is burdened with a limited physical infrastructure and an underdeveloped energy sector. The government is currently in the process of implementing ambitious plans intended to transform Rwanda from an aid-dependent, agrarian economy into a more self-sufficient, knowledge-based economy. These projects are focused on improving transit links, expanding telecommunications networks, and securing stable energy and water supplies for the entire population.

### Railways and Roads

Since Rwanda has no railway system, roads are the primary means of moving both people and commercial goods throughout the country. Of its 27,757 miles of roadway, only 4% are paved, although the roads linking major cities are in generally good condition.



Share taxis (privately-operated minibuses) are the most popular form of mass transit. Share taxis follow either a local schedule, in which they stop frequently and continue only when the

taxi is full, or an express schedule, in which they travel between set locations on a fixed timetable. Motorcycle and bicycle taxis are also common, although they are generally only used for short trips within a single city.

The bulk of Rwanda's international trade passes through the ports of Mombasa, Kenya, and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. To reduce the high cost of moving goods to those ports by truck, the Rwandan government is constructing a high-speed rail link between Kigali and the inland transit hub of Isaka, Tanzania.

### Ports and Waterways

Rwanda has three commercial ports, all of which lie on the shores of Lake Kivu: Cyangugu in the South, Kibuye in the East,

and Gisenyi in the North. These ports can only accommodate barges and other shallow-draft watercraft.

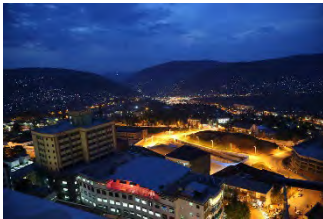
### Airways

Rwanda has nine airports and airstrips, four of which have paved runways. The only true international airport is Kigali International Airport, where commercial airlines share with the Rwandan Air Force. To support Rwanda's rapid economic growth since 1994 (see p.1 of *Economics and Resources*), the government has undertaken a \$2 billion project to construct New Bugesera International Airport in the town of Nyamata, about 25 miles south of Kigali. The new airport is expected to handle 14 million passengers-per-year by 2032. RwandAir, the national carrier, operates a fleet of six airliners out of Kigali, with several direct flights-per-week to regional cities like Bujumbura, Dar es Salaam, Entebbe, Goma, Nairobi, Johannesburg, and Kilimanjaro.



### Energy

Electricity is rare in Rwanda, available to only 51% of the population, mainly in urban areas, and accounting for less than 15% of Rwanda's energy usage. The bulk of Rwanda's energy comes from biomass, a category which includes wood, charcoal, peat, and agricultural waste. Biomass is widely used in rural Rwanda, where 62% of the population is largely not connected to the electrical grid. Using wood for fuel, which accounts for



over 83% of Rwanda's total energy capacity, results in deforestation – a process which releases greenhouse gases, reduces biodiversity, and erodes soil.

The government is working to address Rwanda's energy problems by opening new hydroelectric dams, increasing electricity imports from neighboring countries, expanding



methane extraction from Lake Kivu, and evaluating hot springs near Lake Kivu as a potential source of geothermal power.

### **Telephone**

Rwanda's small and substandard landline system serves roughly 10,327 lines primarily associated with schools, businesses, and government offices. Rwanda's mobile cellular system has grown substantially in recent years, providing more than 80 lines for every 100 Rwandans. This rate of mobile penetration is over 6 times the 2005 rate. In addition, 3G and 4G mobile data services are now available in Rwanda.

### **Television and Radio**

The government owns and operates Television Rwandaise, the only free broadcast television station. DSTV, a South African firm, and Star Media, a Chinese firm, both offer paid satellite television service. The government also owns and operates Radio Rwanda, which broadcasts out of Kigali on 100.7 FM in English, French, Kinyarwanda, and Swahili. Unlike Television Rwandaise, Radio Rwanda has a number of competitors on the airwaves including international services, like the BBC and Voice of America, in addition to a number of domestic stations which have sprung up since the government first permitted private radio stations in 2004.

### **Internet and Computers**

The government recently extended Internet connectivity throughout Rwanda by installing a combination of fiber optic cables and wireless broadband transmitters. After linking this domestic infrastructure to major fiber optic networks submerged in the Indian Ocean, Rwanda experienced quadrupled efficiency in Internet connectivity, with its costs decreasing by 75%. Rwanda now has the fastest Internet service in Africa. Similarly, Internet cafes are common, providing easy external access. As of 2021, 30% of the population or 3.9 million people used the Internet regularly.





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