

KINYARWANDA

LANGUAGE & CULTURE



Rwanda woman with basket.

Kinyarwanda is the language most widely spoken in Rwanda. English and French are basically tied for second place linguistically, though French has the au-dessus main. Swahili is also useful in some parts of the country especially in Kigali and other towns; it is also used for commerce. According to the 2001 census, Kinyarwanda is spoken by 99% of the population, Swahili 20%, French 8%, and English 5%.

Kinyarwanda is a Bantu language spoken by approximately

20,000,000 people, with over 8,000,000 in Rwanda. Kinyarwanda is part of the Bantu sub-group of the central branch of the Niger-Congo language family. It is closely related to Kirundi, the language of Burundi. The Rwanda language is mutually intelligible with Kirundi, which is spoken in neighboring Burundi.

In terms of religion, Christianity dominates. It is practiced by two-thirds of the population. Due to the influx of Christian missionaries under German colonialism in the early 1900s, tribal religious beliefs occupy another 25% of Rwandans, while less than 10% of residents are Muslims.

Music and dance play an important role in the traditions of Rwandan people. Many songs and dances include epics that commemorate excellence and bravery, humorous lyrics, and hunting roots. They are often accompanied by the *Inanga*, a harp-like instrument used by Rwandan Artists.

Some common Kinyarwanda words one is bound to come across include: *Amakuru*, a greeting expression equivalent to 'how are things?'; *Nimeza* which is the reply to mean 'that's fine'; *Yego* which means 'yes'; *Oya*, which means 'no'; *Ndabizi* which means 'I know'; *simbizi* which means 'I don't know'; and *Amazi*, which means 'water'.

STUDYING KINYARWANDA IN THE U.S.

Below are some universities in the United States that currently offer Kinyarwanda. Please contact the National African Language Resource Center or check the NALRC website at <http://lang.nalrc.wisc.edu/nalrc>.

Michigan State University



NATIONAL AFRICAN
LANGUAGE RESOURCE
CENTER (NALRC)

701 Eigenmann Hall, 1900 East 10th Street
Bloomington, IN 47406 USA
Telephone: (812) 856-4199, Fax: 8128564189
Email: nalrc@indiana.edu
Website: <http://www.nalrc.indiana.edu>



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NATIONAL AFRICAN LANGUAGE
RESOURCE CENTER (NALRC)

WHY STUDY KINYARWANDA

Kinyarwanda, also known as Ikinyarwanda or Urunyarwanda, is an African language of the Bantu family spoken in Rwanda. As a national language, it is spoken all over the country by the entire population of Rwanda. As an official language, it is used in administration, schools, and media along with French and English. Swahili Language is also used mostly in Rwandan urban areas and in commerce.

One reason to study Kinyarwanda is that Rwanda is a great tourist destination. Located in the Great Lakes Region of Central Africa, Rwanda is often called “the country of a thousand hills” and praised to be “the land of perpetual springs.” Most importantly, Rwanda is best known as the home of the endangered species; particularly the “Mountain Gorillas”—the largest of the apes which reside in the volcanic forests of Rwanda and whose breathtaking mysteries were featured in the famous film “Gorillas in the Mist.” In this respect, the study of Kinyarwanda may not only interest tourists, but it would certainly be instrumental for conservationists of the endangered mountain gorilla and their habitat, who may be involved in anti-poaching or wildlife research programs.

Potential visitors may also want to familiarize themselves with Kinyarwanda, which is the language of the locals, so as to discover Rwanda’s cultural and artistic wonders. Although the country has experienced several episodes of violence which culminated in the 1994 genocide, it has kept alive its sophisticated traditional values, which are worth to discovering. So, if one has a personal interest in the dominant central African cultures one might find it useful to learn Kinyarwanda.

In addition, Rwanda would undoubtedly constitute a unique case study for researchers and students in Genocide studies, Anthropology, Sociology, African linguistics, etc... and all those who may want to conduct research in Rwanda and its environs would obviously find a working knowledge of Kinyarwanda very helpful since most of the locals speak no other language than Kinyarwanda. On their part, Peace Corps volunteers, missionaries, and International Aid workers, will be able to work smoothly in Rwanda if they can communicate in the language of the locals.

One added advantage of learning Kinyarwanda is definitely the fact that it is closely related to Kirundi, a language spoken in neighboring Burundi, and Giha spoken in Western Tanzania, to which it is fully intelligible. And if one considers that Kinyarwanda is also spoken by different tribes in the Eastern part of the Democratic Republic of Congo as well as in the Southern part of Uganda, regional immersion wouldn’t be difficult for one who speaks that local language.

KINYARWANDA PEOPLE AND HISTORY

The Rwandan people inhabit Rwanda, a small country tucked deep in the central part of Africa, east of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. All of them speak Kinyarwanda, as their mother tongue, although there are slight dialectical variations associated with the way the language is spoken in certain northern parts of the country. Kinyarwanda also goes across the borders of Rwanda where it is adopted to a lesser extent by certain communities within Burundi, Tanzania, Congo, and Uganda.

The inhabitants of Rwanda belong to three different groups known as Hutu, Tutsi and Twa who for centuries lived side by side to the point of forging a relatively unified culture. The Hutus—who make up the majority group in Rwanda—were originally Bantu-speaking farmers who for most of the past five centuries found themselves under the domination of the Tutsi monarchs.

Oral tradition says during the 15th century, a ruler named Gihanga forged a centralized Rwanda State with similar roots to the Buganda and Bunyoro empires in neighboring Uganda. The Rwanda kingdom, which quickly came under control of the minority Tutsi cattle-keepers, relied much upon cattle owning nobility and the agriculturalist serfdom system. The precursors of this powerful state were able to repel all early attempts at of European penetration. Rwanda eventually became a German colony until the Belgian colonialists took over, just after World War II. With the Belgian colonial rule, the tensions between Hutu and Tutsi widened due the colonial policies that favored the minority Tutsi at the expense of the Hutu majority. So, the Tutsi aristocracy remained in power until it was removed by the Hutu uprisings of the late 1950s, just a few years before the Belgians conceded to Rwanda’s independence in 1962.

However, after independence, and throughout the Hutu-controlled regimes, ethnic tensions between Hutus and Tutsis became increasingly volatile, culminating in a 4-year-long civil war. The war started in 1990 and ended with the most horrendous genocide of the 20th Century, targeting the Tutsis minority in 1994. Today, Rwanda is relatively secure compared to other countries of the sub-region.



Rwanda ceramics.



Rwanda woman with traditional attire.



Rwandan man in a sorghum plantation.