WHY STUDY KIRUNDI?

Burundi is regarded as a haven of culture. The Centre for Burundi Culture, founded in 1977, nurtures a ‘living museum’ that celebrates the artistic skills of the people. The cultural center boasts of an open air theatre, botanical garden, music pavilion, historical artifacts and a crafts village. The country has a strong oral tradition consisting of stories, legends, fables, poems, riddles, dances and songs. For instance, the popular Tutsi traditional dance troupe, Les Tambounaïnares du Burundi has performed in New York and Berlin. Both history and culture have been passed on from one generation to the other. Written literature is virtually non-existent. Thus to understand the rich oral heritage of Burundi, one needs to learn the country’s language and cultural traditions.

Although traditional animist beliefs are still practiced, about 70% of the population has been converted to Christianity while 10% are Muslims. Traditional religion places more emphasis on fate rather than free will. Everything is believed to be controlled by Imana as the source of all life and goodness. In animism, physical objects are believed to possess spirits and the spirits of the ancestors are highly revered. Cattle are invested with a potent spiritual force. They are looked after in accordance with specific religious customs and are treated as objects of prayer and worship. Traditional diviners are believed to possess the capacity to connect with the spirit world and are called upon to mediate between the living and the dead. The Hutu, who regard the spirits as having evil intent, hold services to appease their ancestral spirits. The Tutsi regard the spirits as having benign intent, their king presides over religious ceremonies. Rituals are held to celebrate grain harvests and pay homage to Kiranga, the leading ancestral spirit. In traditional cleansing rituals such as kubandwa, young men decorate their bodies and engage in chants and dances. Young women engage in a fertility ceremony called umuganuro in which a virgin plants the first sorghum seeds to ensure a good harvest.
WHO ARE THE KIRUNDI PEOPLE?

The Hutu, Tutsi and Twa people of Burundi are the main speakers of Kirundi, although with slightly different accents. The majority Hutus are historically cattle herding people. Cattle therefore hold a high symbolic power among the Kirundi. This is reflected in the typical Kirundi greeting, amashyo meaning ‘may you have more herds of cattle’. The Kirundi therefore speak a language full of references in which cattle stand for wealth, health, prosperity and happiness. The minority Tutsi are a tall martial people who migrated from the Nile region in search of cattle pastures. Although they accounted for 15% of the population, they managed to subdue the Hutu and Twa and establish political and economic control in the region. The Twa people, the least in number, are thought to be the original inhabitants of Burundi and descendants of the pygmies.

The ethnic strife between the Hutu and Tutsi dates back to the 15th century when the Tutsi subdued the Hutu majority. Subsequent colonial governments by the Germans and later the Belgians only worsened the situation. For instance, in 1906 the Germans made a deal with the Tutsi king guaranteeing him protection against his enemies in exchange for German rule. The domination of the Hutu majority by the Tutsi minority created antagonism and divisiveness between the two groups. Thus anti-Tutsi sentiment grew among the Hutu resulting in an ongoing ethnic conflict that culminated in the genocide of 1994..

WHAT'S THE NATURE OF THEIR LANGUAGE AND CULTURE?

Kirundi or Rundi is a Bantu language spoken by approximately 5 million people in Burundi. Kirundi speakers are also found in neighbouring countries such as Rwanda, Uganda, Tanzania and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Along with French, English and Swahili, Kirundi is the official language of Burundi. There is mutual intelligibility between Kirundi and Kinyarwanda, another ethnic language spoken in Burundi and Rwanda.

Most of the Kirundi customs revolve around the treatment of cattle which are considered sacred. For instance, milk cannot be heated, boiled or drunk on the same day that peanuts or peas are consumed. When a cow dies, its horns are planted in the soil close to the hut in order to bring more fortunes. The Hutu who have a long tradition of working on the land have provided much of the labour of caring for Tutsi cattle. It is possible for the Hutu or Twa to join the Tutsi class through acts of unusual bravery and honour, and also for Tutsi to fall into the Hutu class if they commit dishonourable acts. Apart from cattle, the spear and the drum are also considered as status symbols. The king’s drum called mwami was considered the ultimate traditional symbol of power.

At the family level, women are respected especially for their power as life givers or child bearers. However, they have little decision making authority in society since men hold the responsibility of protecting and providing for the family. Traditionally, it was the duty of the father to find a wife for his son. The parents of the prospective groom meet with those of the potential bride to discuss lobola (brideprice) which took the form of cattle, goats and hoes but it now consists of cash, clothing and furniture. The lobola is paid on the day the bride leaves her parents for the husband’s home. Upon marriage, a woman becomes part of her husband’s family. When the father dies, inheritance passes from the family head (i. e. the father) to his eldest son. This can be symbolized by the handing over of the ceremonial spear. Kinship ties are moulded along the extended family lineage and clans live in close proximity. For instance, the Tutsi’s divide their kinship groups into four royal clans called ganwa – the Batare, Bezi, Bataga and Bambutsu. These royal clans are the descendants of the four dynasties that once ruled the country.