**Rwandans**

**PRONUNCIATION:** ruh-WAHN-duhns

**LOCATION:** Rwanda

**POPULATION:** 7 million

**LANGUAGE:** Kinyarwanda; French; Swahili; English

**RELIGION:** Roman Catholicism; Protestantism; Islam; small numbers of Baha'is

**1 • INTRODUCTION**

Rwanda is one of the only African kingdoms to have kept its identity through the [colonial era](http://www.everyculture.com/knowledge/Early_modern_period.html) (1890–1962). However, colonial rule harmed Rwanda in ways that helped lead to ethnic warfare in the 1990s.

Rwanda is home to three ethnic groups: the [Hutu](http://www.everyculture.com/knowledge/Hutu.html) (about 85–90 percent of the population); the [Tutsi](http://www.everyculture.com/knowledge/Tutsi.html) (10–15 percent); and the Twa (less than 1 percent). The cultures of these groups have much in common. They have spoken the same language for at least five hundred years.

Rwanda became a German colony in the 1890s. The Germans treated the upper-class Tutsi better than the Hutu. After Germany lost World War I (1914–18), the Belgians took control. Like the Germans, they favored the Tutsi. As a result, some (but not all) Tutsi were better off due to colonial rule. This angered the Hutu majority, and ethnic violence broke out in 1959. Many Tutsis were killed, and many more fled to nearby countries. The Tutsi monarchy was overthrown, and Rwanda became an independent nation in 1962.

For almost thirty years, Hutu political parties held power. In 1990, however, a rebel group composed mostly of Tutsi refugees invaded Rwanda from Uganda. Fighting raged, off and on, for the next four years. In 1994, up to 1 million people were killed. The victims were mostly Tutsi. However, many Hutu who opposed the government also died. In the end, the rebels overthrew the government. The new government vowed to build a society that would not be based on ethnic divisions.

**2 • LOCATION**

Rwanda is a tiny country in the Great Lakes region of Central Africa. It is about as large as the state of Massachusetts. To Rwanda's west is the [Democratic Republic of the Congo](http://www.everyculture.com/knowledge/Democratic_Republic_of_the_Congo.html) (formerly Zaire). To the east is Tanzania. Uganda is directly to the north, while Burundi is located to the south. Rwanda is very close to the equator. However, it has a temperate climate because of its high altitude.

Rwanda has a total population of close to 7 million people. In 1994 as many as 1 million Rwandans fled to refugee camps in Tanzania, Burundi, and the former Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo). The majority were Hutus. Civil war broke out in Zaire in 1996, and most of the Hutu refugees there returned to Rwanda.

Kigali, the capital, is Rwanda's largest city. It has a population of about 300,000 people.

**3 • LANGUAGE**

All Rwandans speak a Bantu language called *Kinyarwanda* . It is a difficult language for outsiders to learn. For example, Kinyarwanda has over twenty different kinds of nouns. In contrast, English has only two: singular and plural.

French is Rwanda's second language. It is spoken by many educated Rwandans. Some Rwandans speak Swahili, a common language of East and Central Africa. English is also spoken, especially in cities.

**4 • FOLKLORE**

Rwanda is rich in legends, stories, and poetry. In the past, they were memorized and recited by men who served the king. In the twentieth century much of Rwanda's [folklore](http://www.everyculture.com/knowledge/Folklore.html) was written. For this reason Rwanda has a better record of its history and traditions than most neighboring countries.

Rwandan stories and legends are still told to instruct children or to entertain.

**5 • RELIGION**

Missionaries have converted many Rwandans to Christianity since the colonial era (1890–1962). Today about 60 percent of Rwandans are Roman Catholics. Another 20–30 percent are Protestants. There is also a small Muslim (followers of Islam) minority and some followers of the Baha'i faith.

Rwandans often combine native religions with Christianity. They believe that Imaana, their traditional god, is well-meaning but distant. Imaana is most often contacted through the spirits of deceased family members.

**6 • MAJOR HOLIDAYS**

Rwandans celebrate the major Christian holy days such as Christmas (December 25) and Easter (in March or April). They also observe other Roman Catholic festivals, including Ascension Day (forty days after Easter) and All Saints' Day (November 1). Most of the traditional Rwandan festivals are no longer national holidays. However, a harvest ritual called *Umuganura* is still celebrated in August.

**7 • RITES OF PASSAGE**

Rwandan rites of passage include birth, marriage, blood brotherhood, and death. Rwandans who practice traditional religions are initiated into the cults of Ryangombe or Nyabingi. Baptism and confirmation are important turning points in the lives of Rwandan Christians.

Birth is the first rite of passage. When a baby is born, the mother and child are left alone for up to eight days. When this period is over, friends and relatives visit and bring gifts. The baby is shown in public for the first time and its name is announced.

Rwandans do not have an initiation rite at puberty. They are not considered adults until they have married and had a child. Marriage happens in several stages, from the engagement to the wedding. At each stage, the families of the groom and bride exchange gifts. The most important gift is the bride wealth cow that the husband gives his future wife's father.

Most Rwandans have a Christian funeral. However, traditional rituals are often observed as well. It is common to sacrifice a cow or bull, for example.

**8 • RELATIONSHIPS**

Rwandans are usually friendly, polite, and helpful. In rural areas, people greet everybody they pass in the fields and pathways. In the cities people are expected to greet everyone they know. The warmest greeting is similar to a hug. Each person's left hand touches the other person's hip. The right hand reaches up to touch the other person's shoulder…

Rwandans spend much of their time visiting. Guests are always offered something to drink.

Tutsi and Hutu will often share the same cooking pots and drink containers. However, Twa are not allowed to drink or eat from the same containers. Their dishes are kept separate from those of everyone else.

**9 • LIVING CONDITIONS**

Different social classes in Rwanda live very differently. Conditions in the city and the country also vary greatly. In the cities, rich Rwandans may live in brick houses with running water, indoor plumbing, electricity, and telephones. But most urban Rwandans live more simply. Many have small houses with mud walls and iron roofs. Most lack electricity, running water, and indoor plumbing.

In rural areas, the houses vary. Some wealthy people live in brick houses with tile roofs. Wattle-and-daub (rod and clay) houses are more common. The oldest houses are circular. More recently, many Rwandans have built rectangular houses with iron or [thatched](http://www.everyculture.com/knowledge/Thatching.html) roofs. These houses usually lack indoor plumbing, electricity, and running water

**10 • FAMILY LIFE**

*Inzu,* the Rwandan word for family, means either "family," "household," or "house." The Rwandan family consists of a husband, one or more wives, and the children. (Only about 10 percent of Rwandan men have more than one wife.) When a man has more than one wife, each one has her own house on the family grounds.

After the inzu, the next largest family unit is the *umuryango* . It consists of several inzus who trace their family line back five or six generations to the same male ancestor. Rwandans must marry someone outside their *umuryango.* A young man goes to see the father of a woman he wishes to marry. His father also pays a visit and brings gifts. Then the two fathers discuss the marriage. The bridegroom and his father have to pay at least one bride wealth cow to the bride's father. This payment grants legal status to any children the couple have.

**11 • CLOTHING**

Today Rwandans wear modern Western-style clothing. However, they buy it at used clothing stores. Some Rwandans can afford to buy new clothing made by tailors in Rwanda. The traditional Rwandan costumes made of animal skins and bark cloth is seen only in museums.

**12 • FOOD**

The two most common foods are beans and plantains. (Plantains are similar to bananas.) Often they are boiled together. Another food staple is sorghum grain. It is used as a beverage, a porridge, and a type of flour. Rwandan beer is brewed from sorghum and plantains. Other common foods are white potatoes, sweet potatoes, manioc (cassava), and maize (corn).

Only wealthy Rwandans eat meat often. The most common meat is goat. It is usually barbecued over a charcoal burner. Beef is the most valued meat. In most cases it is only eaten if a bull or cow is sacrificed for a ritual. In the past, Rwandans hardly ate any fish. Today, fish farming provides tilapia and catfish.

Only urban Rwandans eat three times a day. Except for a beverage, Rwandan farmers don't eat until about midday. Often they cook food right in the field. They eat again after returning home at night.

**13 • EDUCATION**

Rwandan children begin primary school at age seven. By law all children are ensured at least a sixth-grade education. Sometimes, however, parents cannot afford school uniforms, supplies, and other expenses. Only the better students attend secondary school. Rwandans can go to a university, a nursing school, or even a medical school in their own country. Some study in Europe or the United States.

Many Rwandans in rural areas cannot read or write.

Families try hard to educate all their children. However, this is rarely possible because education is so costly.

**14 • CULTURAL HERITAGE**

Groups known as *intore* perform traditional ritual dances. The dancers wear headdresses made from dried grasses. They carry small shields on their left arms. There is also dancing at weddings and other special occasions. The Twa people are renowned for their musical skills. Rwanda has its own musical instruments.

**15 • EMPLOYMENT**

Rwandans work very hard. Men in rural areas try to find paid employment but also perform farm tasks. The women mostly farm instead of working for wages. In the cities, though, many women have paid jobs.

**16 • SPORTS**

The most popular sport in Rwanda is soccer. The country's many soccer clubs compete in organized leagues. Large crowds attend soccer matches, especially when the national team is playing. Running has become very popular. Rwandans begin competing in races at a very young age.

**17 • RECREATION**

Almost everyone in Rwanda owns and listens to a radio. In the cities, the wealthier people have televisions and VCRs. There are video stores in large cities. In urban dance clubs, one can hear American rock music, Caribbean reggae, and pop music from Zaire and Kenya. American dances are popular, but the Rwandans do them their own way.

Special occasions such as weddings also provide recreation. Food and beer are served, and there is music and dancing.

**18 • CRAFTS AND HOBBIES**

Rwandans are known for weaving baskets and mats with detailed designs. Similar designs are painted on large cooking pots made by Twa potters. In recent years, wood-carving, sculpture, and painting have become important crafts.

**19 • SOCIAL PROBLEMS**

The most pressing social problem in Rwanda today is ethnic conflict. Restoring the country after the violence of 1994 has been a difficult task. In the final weeks of 1996, hundreds of thousands of Hutu returned to Rwanda from refugee camps in Tanzania and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (formerly Zaire).

Differences between rich and poor have widened the country's ethnic divisions. Poor rural youths migrate to cities but often cannot find jobs. They then turn to crime or get involved in terrorist activities.