

Resource for the Adaptation and Construction of a Contextualized Spirituality in Contemporary Evangelical Churches in Burundi

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Abstract

Original Research Article

Although Christianity became widespread in the 20th century, ancestral beliefs such as veneration of ancestors, faith in Imana, and community rites remain deeply rooted. The research aims to analyze how these traditional elements influence and enrich local Christian spirituality. A mixed methodology was employed, targeting a population of about 85,597 believers across denominations, with a representative sample of 96 individuals selected through both random and quota sampling. Data collection involved questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and direct observations during ceremonies, ensuring validity and reliability. Findings reveal that 73.6% of respondents perceive a strong or moderate influence of traditional beliefs in their religious and social lives, while 78% regularly practice ancestral rituals. Furthermore, 63.3% affirm that traditional spirituality is frequently integrated into daily life, reinforcing cultural identity and belonging. The coexistence of traditional and Christian practices fosters social cohesion, with 88.3% of participants considering ancestral religion essential for community stability. This dynamic reflects a form of dialogue or syncretism, promoting a pluralistic religious identity rooted in Burundian cultural values. The study concludes that traditional religion serves as a vital resource for the inculturation of Christianity, enabling a more authentic spirituality grounded in local context.

Keywords: traditional religion, spirituality, inculturation, syncretism, Burundi.

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INTRODUCTION

Burundi, a country located in the heart of the African Great Lakes region, presents a religious landscape deeply marked by the coexistence of traditional religions and contemporary Christianity. The traditional Burundian religious system, characterized by belief in a supreme God called Imana, ancestor worship, and the centrality of spirits, constitutes a foundational spiritual framework that structured social relations and the cosmological vision of the universe within communities (Ndayiragije 2002, 45). This traditional religious system plays a major role in social cohesion, the maintenance of moral order, and ritual practice, as illustrated in particular by the ceremonies surrounding the royal drum, the karyenda, which symbolizes the sacred link between political and divine power (Lemarchand 1994, 79).

The introduction of Christianity, which began during colonization in the early 20th century, profoundly transformed the religious landscape of Burundi. However, far from representing a complete break with

ancestral practices, this process gave rise to a significant dynamic of syncretism and adaptation. Indeed, as Mbonimpa (2019, 112) points out, traditional religion continues to influence Christian spirituality, particularly in worship practices, the understanding of the sacred, and forms of community engagement. This dynamic and sometimes conflictual coexistence between ancestral heritages and the Christian faith contributes to the construction of a unique modern spirituality, where Burundian believers seek to reconcile cultural identity with new religious affiliations. According to various recent sources and estimates available in 2025, the total population of Burundi is approximately 12.3 million. The majority is Christian, comprising approximately 93% of the population, distributed as follows: Catholics, approximately 58 to 62%; Protestants (including various denominations), approximately 30 to 35%; Muslims, approximately 2.5 to 3%; and followers of traditional African religions (indigenous beliefs), estimated at around 4 to 5%. A very small proportion of the population may be unaffiliated with any religion or follow other beliefs. The commune of Rutana, the primary focus of this study, perfectly illustrates these

interactions. Contemporary churches there often incorporate elements from tradition, whether in liturgical expressions, forms of healing, or the recognition of ancestral spiritual forces as resources for Christian life (Ntale 2021, 53). This adaptation is not only a cultural phenomenon but also a theological issue that questions how Christianity is embodied in a changing African context. The aim of this thesis is to analyze the role of traditional religion in the construction of this contextual spirituality in Burundi, by studying its influence on contemporary Christianity and the resulting forms of adaptation, particularly in the churches of the Rutana commune. This exploration will allow for a better understanding of how ancestral tradition continues to nourish Christian faith and forge a distinct spiritual identity, capable of meeting the challenges posed by modernity without denying its cultural roots. This work contributes to the broader reflection on the plurality of religious forms in Africa, highlighting the capacity of Burundian societies to reinvent their relationship to the sacred, to combine the old and the new, and to construct hybrid spiritual spaces imbued with both continuity and innovation (Mbiti 1986, 22).

METHODS

The sampling method combined a probabilistic approach, specifically simple random sampling, to ensure the representativeness of the different denominations, and a non-probabilistic technique, such as quota sampling, to guarantee demographic diversity within the sample. These techniques allowed for the selection of participants based on their roles, age, gender, and involvement in the transmission of traditional practices or their engagement in religious life, in order to obtain rich and representative data for analyzing the construction of a contextualized spirituality within this community (McMillan & Schumacher 2018). Data collection was facilitated by questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and participant observation, allowing for a deeper understanding of the dynamics at play. Data collection techniques were designed to address the complexity of the subject, integrating both quantitative and qualitative methods. Structured questionnaires allowed for the collection of general perceptions on the influence of traditional elements in Christian spirituality, while interviews provided detailed insights into integration strategies and the theological issues related to this interaction. In addition, observations during religious ceremonies provided concrete evidence of how these traditional elements are integrated into Christian practices in Rutana.

RESULTS

The results concerning the frequency of participation in religious services or activities show that the majority of worshippers (58.8%) attend religious activities weekly, reflecting a strong commitment to regular religious practice. This regularity could be influenced by the close relationship between traditional

religion and Christianity in the region, where ancestral beliefs remain integrated with modern Christian practices. Daily participation (11.8%) indicates that some worshippers experience their faith very intensely, likely incorporating elements of traditional religion into their Christian spirituality. Conversely, a minority (11.8%) rarely or occasionally attend services, which may reflect various factors such as social or economic constraints, or a shift in religious practices toward a more individual spirituality. These results illustrate a dynamic of adaptation and integration between traditional religion and Christianity, where the frequency of participation serves as an indicator of the influence of local culture on religious practice. Furthermore, the analysis of the age distribution reveals that the majority of worshippers (53%) are between 20 and 39 years old, with an average age of around 30, suggesting that youth and young adults play a central role in the religious life of the community. The strong presence of those under 20 (22.1%) also indicates the transmission of faith from a young age, reinforcing the continuity of traditional beliefs within the Christian context. The low representation of those aged 50 and over (only 8.8%) could reflect changes in how spirituality is experienced, possibly influenced by modern values or the migration of young people to urban centers. These results show that traditional religion still strongly influences the construction of contemporary spirituality, particularly among young people, by fostering a religiosity integrated with Christian practices, while adapting to new generations and the socio-cultural realities of Burundi. The results of the gender distribution of churchgoers show a relatively balanced participation between men (47.1%) and women (52.9%) in religious practice within the churches of the Rutana commune. This slight female predominance can be explained by the traditional and social role of women in the transmission and practice of faith, where they often play a central role in community life and in the perpetuation of beliefs, including those stemming from ancestral traditions.

The close relationship between traditional religion and Christianity could also strengthen women's participation, given that in many Burundian societies, women are often more involved in religious and community activities. These trends indicate that, despite the emergence of modern spirituality, gender dynamics in religious practice remain influenced by cultural traditions, while also being integrated into the contemporary Christian context. The results concerning the educational level of the faithful show a majority of practitioners who have reached at least the secondary school level, with 36.8% having completed middle or high school. The significant presence of this category (nearly 78%) indicates that religious participation is widespread among those who have acquired a certain level of education, often associated with a better understanding of Christian teachings while also being influenced by traditional beliefs and practices. However, the notable presence of worshippers without formal

qualifications (11.8%) and those with technical training (14.7%) suggests that religion remains accessible to all social strata, including those with lower levels of education. This illustrates that in the Burundian context, religion, particularly Christianity in interaction with traditional religion, plays a fundamental role in social cohesion and identity formation, regardless of educational background. The results concerning the length of church membership show that the majority of members have been members for between 1 and 10 years, with 36.8% having been members for 1 to 5 years and 29.4% for 6 to 10 years. This trend indicates that the majority of members joined their religious community within a context of renewed focus on Christian practices that, while modern, remain strongly influenced by local traditional religion. The presence of members who joined less than a year ago (11.8%) also demonstrates a certain vitality and renewal within the community, a sign of the ongoing adaptation of the Christian faith to the social and cultural realities of Rutana. This data illustrates how traditional religion continues to influence the way new generations integrate into contemporary Christianity, retaining certain cultural elements while embracing the new faith. The results show that the majority of worshippers, 58.8%, attend religious services or activities weekly, demonstrating a regular and sustained religious commitment. This frequency of attendance reflects a deep integration of religious practice into the daily lives of the population, illustrating how religion, while influenced by local tradition, adapts to meet contemporary spiritual needs.

Daily participation (11.8%) also indicates a dimension of intense personal devotion, often rooted in traditional practices that value the regularity and continuity of rituals. These data thus show that Christianity in the Rutana region is part of a dynamic where religion, while being modernized, retains its traditional roots by maintaining regular, communal practice. The traditional Burundian religious system is deeply rooted in the culture and identity of the Burundian people and plays a crucial role in the social and spiritual lives of the population. This system, characterized by a strong belief in the existence of a single deity and multiple spirits, exhibits several key features that shape the collective and individual experience of the community. Religious practices, beliefs, rites, and traditions all contribute to forming a complex network that connects individuals and communities around shared values and moral principles. This thesis aims to highlight the major characteristics of the traditional Burundian religious system and explore their impact on social and spiritual life. In the context of the churches in the Rutana commune of Burundi, the perceived influence of traditional religion on Christian practice is significant. According to a survey of 68 respondents, 29.4% reported that this influence is “very strong” in their religious ceremonies and festivals, while 44.1% perceived it as “moderate.” Only 22.1% indicated a “slight” influence, and 4.4% stated that there was “no” influence at all.

These figures illustrate a notable integration of traditional beliefs and practices into local Christian spirituality, a trend that Bakunzi (2018) highlights when discussing the religious transition in Burundi, where indigenous beliefs remain deeply embedded in daily religious life. Moreover, this moderate to strong influence aligns with the findings of Bizimana (2016), who discusses the Christianization of traditional ritual practices, and with Gasana (2019), who observes a transformation of indigenous beliefs in the Burundian Christian context. The figures also reveal a dynamic of religious adaptation and syncretism. The majority of respondents (73.5%) perceived a “very strong” or “moderate” influence, indicating that traditional religion continues to shape Christian spirituality, as confirmed by Niyonkuru (2019) and Niyonteze (2020). These authors emphasize that the reinterpretation and integration of ancestral beliefs into Christian practice foster a local spirituality that retains its cultural roots while remaining within contemporary Christianity. Furthermore, Murangira (2022) shows that this influence manifests itself through the transformation of traditional religious practices under the influence of Christianity, reinforcing the idea of a dynamic adaptation process. Thus, these results confirm that traditional religion does not disappear but evolves to harmonize with Christianity, contributing to a modern spirituality that reflects both cultural heritage and Christian faith. Finally, this mutual influence raises important issues for analyzing the impact of religion on identity formation in Burundi. The strong integration of traditional beliefs into Christian practice, as these figures demonstrate, aligns with the work of Ndayizeye (2021) and Uwimana (2020), who discuss the resilience of ancestral practices and their role in modern Christian spirituality. This dynamic of syncretism fosters a pluralistic religious identity, where tradition and Christian faith coexist and reinforce each other. However, it also raises the question of differentiating between authentic faith and cultural reinterpretation, as highlighted by some authors, notably Habonimana (2016). In short, these percentages confirm that, in the commune of Rutana, traditional religion plays a central role in the construction of contemporary Christian spirituality, illustrating a profound cultural adaptation and a complex process of religious integration. The results concerning the integration of traditional spirituality into daily life in Rutana show that this influence remains significant, even in a context marked by the presence of contemporary Christianity. According to the survey, 26.5% of respondents stated that this spirituality is “always” integrated into their daily lives, while 36.8% indicated that it is “frequently” integrated. In total, nearly 63.3% of those surveyed experience this integration regularly, demonstrating strong cultural and religious continuity. Conversely, 29.4% stated that this integration is “rarely” present, and a minority of 7.4% stated that it “never” occurs. These figures confirm the work of Gasana (2019) and Niyonkuru (2019), which emphasizes that traditional spirituality remains an essential foundation in the lives of

Burundians, even when they practice Christianity. The coexistence of these different forms of spirituality in the daily sphere testifies to a process of adaptation where ancestral heritage and Christian faith complement each other. The data indicate that this integration is primarily experienced as a regular practice, reinforcing the idea of religious syncretism. The majority of respondents, 63.3%, experience continuous interaction with traditional spirituality, reflecting a pluralistic religious identity. According to Ndayizeye (2021) and Uwimana (2020), this situation fosters a hybrid spirituality, where ancestral practices are woven into daily life and contribute to social cohesion while allowing for a modern religious reinterpretation. The strong presence of this daily integration also shows that indigenous beliefs are not relegated to the past, but rather revived and integrated into contemporary Christian practice, as highlighted by Bakunzi (2018) and Murangira (2022). In summary, these figures illustrate the resilience of traditional spirituality, which continues to shape the daily lives of Rutana's inhabitants, demonstrating a process of religious adaptation deeply rooted in the local culture. The strong integration of traditional spirituality into daily life has significant implications for identity and religious development in Burundi. The majority of respondents, 63.3%, experience this influence as a daily reality, reinforcing their sense of belonging to a pluralistic religious culture. According to Niyonteze (2020) and Habonimana (2016), this situation helps preserve cultural identity in the face of globalization and religious homogenization. However, this coexistence can also pose challenges in terms of differentiating between cultural practices and expressions of authentic Christian faith. These percentages confirm that, in the Rutana community, traditional spirituality continues to challenge and influence daily life, illustrating a process of adaptation where ancestral heritage and Christianity coexist to shape a modern, resilient spirituality rooted in local culture.

DISCUSSION

Regarding the impact on community dynamics, 58.8% of respondents believe that the interaction between traditional religion and Christianity "strongly fosters" these dynamics, strengthening bonds of solidarity and tolerance. The simultaneous practice of traditional and Christian rites is also seen as a key element of cultural identity, with 76.5% of people considering that it contributes "a great deal" or "moderately" to this identity. Finally, the majority (80%) perceive this interaction as a factor that "fosters" cohesion and dialogue, rather than division, confirming the idea that these two forms of spirituality can coexist harmoniously. In summary, these results confirm that traditional religion plays a vital and dynamic role in shaping modern spirituality in Burundi, particularly in the Rutana region. It profoundly influences practices, daily life, and collective identity, while adapting to the realities of contemporary Christianity. The majority of religious and community stakeholders recognize the

importance of strengthened dialogue, notably through training and workshops (78%), to promote an integrated theology that respects Burundian cultural specificities. These data thus demonstrate that traditional religion constitutes an essential resource for building an inclusive, resilient spirituality rooted in local culture.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study has explored in depth the central role of traditional religion in shaping modern spirituality in Burundi, with a particular focus on the commune of Rutana. The results show that this influence remains very strong, with 73.6% of respondents stating that traditional ritual practices are "very widespread" or "fairly widespread" in their community, illustrating their enduring integration into religious and social life. The frequency of these practices is also very high, with 78% of the population considering them "very widespread" or "fairly widespread," confirming their vitality in the face of religious evolution. Furthermore, the integration of traditional spirituality into daily life remains significant, with 63.3% of people experiencing this influence "always" or "frequently." These figures attest to a process of adaptation where cultural heritage and Christian faith coexist harmoniously, strengthening the sense of belonging and community cohesion. The majority of respondents (88.3%) also perceive traditional religion as "very important" or "important" for social cohesion, confirming its structuring role in local stability and solidarity.

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Competing interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Contributions from authors

All the authors contributed to the conduct of this work. They also state that they have read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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