

# Toward a Dialogue: Indigenous Rwandan and Christian Understandings of Creation

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**Abstract:** *This study entitled Toward a Dialogue: Indigenous Rwandan and Christian Understandings of Creation explores the relationship between traditional Rwandan conceptions of creation and Christian theology. The research sought to answer the question: how can Indigenous Rwandan understandings of creation contribute to a contextual Christian theology of creation in Rwanda? The study was guided by the hypothesis that Indigenous Rwandan beliefs and Christian teachings on creation contain complementary values that can enrich theological dialogue and inculturation. The main objective was to analyze convergences and divergences between the two traditions and propose a constructive theological synthesis relevant to the Rwandan context. The research involved 55 Year 3 catechesis students from the Faculty of Theology. Data were collected through questionnaires, interviews, and document analysis using qualitative and quantitative methods. Historical, comparative, and theological approaches were applied in the analysis. The findings revealed that 87% of respondents acknowledged similarities between Indigenous Rwandan beliefs and Christian teachings on the sacredness of creation, while 82% supported inculturation as a means of strengthening Christian faith in Rwanda. However, 64% identified syncretism as a major challenge in theological dialogue. The study concludes that constructive dialogue between Rwandan traditions and Christianity can promote ecological responsibility, cultural identity, and a contextual theology of creation for the Church and society in Rwanda.*

**Keywords:** Indigenous Rwandan Knowledge, Christian Theology, Creation, Environmental Stewardship, Ecological Ethics.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The question of creation occupies a central place both in Indigenous Rwandan cosmology and in Christian theology, yet the relationship between these two systems remains insufficiently articulated in many theological and pastoral contexts. In Rwandan traditional thought, creation is understood through relational and holistic categories such as *Imana* (Supreme Being), *ubumwe bw'ibiremwa* (unity of all created beings), and *ubusabane* (communion among beings). Christian theology, particularly through the Biblical narratives of Genesis 1–2 and doctrinal formulations on creation, emphasizes God as creator, humanity as steward, and creation as fundamentally good. However, these two interpretive frameworks have often developed in parallel rather than in dialogue, leading to conceptual fragmentation in lived faith experience.

The problem is further deepened by the limited integration of Indigenous Rwandan categories into formal theological discourse. In some cases, Indigenous cosmological understandings of the visible and invisible worlds, including the role of ancestors (*abakurambere*) and the sacred value of nature (*ibidukikije*), are either overlooked or interpreted through restrictive categories that fail to capture their existential and cultural depth. This has contributed to misunderstandings, pastoral tensions, and concerns regarding syncretism in Christian communities. Scholars such as Mbiti (1969), Kagame (1956), and Bujo (1992) emphasize that African worldviews are inherently religious and relational, suggesting the need for deeper theological engagement rather than exclusion.

The rationale of this study is grounded in the urgent need to construct a contextual theology of creation that bridges Indigenous Rwandan thought and Christian revelation. In the context of ecological crisis, cultural identity affirmation, and inculturation debates in African theology, there is a growing demand for integrative frameworks that respect both doctrinal integrity and cultural authenticity. The Second Vatican Council, particularly in *Gaudium et Spes*, *Nostra Aetate*, and *Ad Gentes*, encourages the recognition of authentic cultural values in theological reflection (Vatican II, 1965). Similarly, Pope Francis in *Laudato Si'* emphasizes the spiritual and ecological responsibility of humanity toward creation (Francis, 2015).

Therefore, this study is justified by its contribution to theological synthesis, cultural dialogue, and ecological awareness. It seeks to respond to the need for a coherent framework in which Indigenous Rwandan cosmology and Christian theology mutually illuminate each other, leading to a more contextual and meaningful theology of creation.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a mixed-methods research design combining qualitative and quantitative approaches in order to achieve a comprehensive understanding of Indigenous Rwandan and Christian conceptions of creation. The mixed design was selected to allow both statistical measurement of perceptions and in-depth theological interpretation of cultural and doctrinal meanings (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010).

The study population consisted of 55 Year 3 catechesis students from the Faculty of Theology. A purposive sampling technique was used to select respondents because they had sufficient theological background and familiarity with both Christian doctrine and Indigenous cultural concepts relevant to creation theology (Patton, 2015; Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018). This ensured that participants could critically engage with both traditions under investigation.

Data were collected using three main instruments: questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. The questionnaires were designed to gather quantitative data on respondents' perceptions regarding similarities, divergences, inculturation, and syncretism. Semi-structured interviews allowed deeper exploration of lived experiences, cultural interpretations, and theological reflections on creation. Document analysis included examination of Biblical texts (Genesis 1–2), Catholic doctrinal sources, Vatican II documents, African theological writings, and Rwandan ethnographic and philosophical literature (Bowen, 2009; Bowen, 2010).

The study employed historical, comparative, and theological analytical approaches. The historical approach was used to trace the development of Indigenous Rwandan cosmological concepts and Christian creation theology. The comparative approach enabled systematic identification of convergences and divergences between the two traditions. The theological approach facilitated critical reflection on how these insights could contribute to a contextual Rwandan theology of creation grounded in both faith and culture (Osmer, 2008; Schreiter, 1985).

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, particularly frequencies and percentages, to determine patterns of response among participants. Qualitative data from interviews and documents were analyzed thematically, identifying recurring concepts such as *Imana*, *ubumuntu*, *ubusabane*, stewardship, and inculturation. Data triangulation was applied to enhance validity by comparing findings across instruments (Denzin, 1978; Flick, 2014).

Ethical considerations were observed throughout the research process, including informed consent, confidentiality, and respect for participants' cultural and

religious beliefs. The methodology therefore ensured both academic rigor and contextual sensitivity in exploring the dialogue between Indigenous Rwandan worldviews and Christian theology of creation.

### 3. TOWARD A DIALOGUE

This study is framed as a “toward a dialogue” approach, emphasizing an open and ongoing encounter between Indigenous Rwandan understandings of creation and Christian theology. It seeks not to oppose but to bring both traditions into constructive conversation around concepts such as *Imana*, *ubumwe bw'ibiremwa*, Genesis creation theology, and *imago Dei*. The aim is to identify convergences and differences in order to develop a contextual theology of creation that is culturally rooted, theologically sound, and responsive to ecological and pastoral realities in Rwanda.

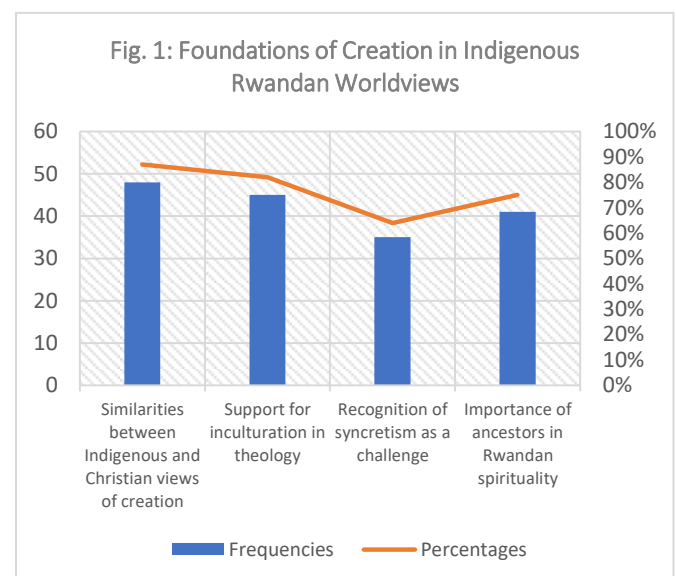
#### 3.1. Foundations of Creation in Indigenous Rwandan Worldviews

Indigenous Rwandan worldviews explain creation through deeply rooted cultural and spiritual concepts that shape the understanding of life, nature, and the universe. In traditional Rwandan cosmology, *Imana* is recognized as the Supreme Being and source of all existence. Rwandans traditionally believe that *Imana yaremye isi n'ijuru* (God created the earth and heaven), establishing harmony between the visible world (*isi iboneka*) and the invisible world (*isi itaboneka*). The visible world includes human beings, animals, rivers, forests, and hills, while the invisible world includes ancestors (*abakurambere*), spirits (*imyuka*), and sacred forces influencing human life. According to Alexis Kagame, Rwandan philosophy perceives existence through the concept of *ubumwe bw'ibiriho* (unity of beings), where all creatures depend on *Imana* and remain interconnected (Kagame, 1956). This vision corresponds to the Christian doctrine that all creation comes from God and is sustained by divine providence (Catechism of the Catholic Church [CCC], 1994, §§279–301). The Second Vatican Council teaches in *Gaudium et Spes* that cultures contain authentic values capable of enriching theological reflection (Vatican II, 1965). John Mbiti similarly argues that African cosmology integrates religion into every aspect of existence because the universe itself is sacred (Mbiti, 1969).

The role of ancestors (*abazimu* or *abakurambere*) occupies an important place in Indigenous Rwandan spirituality. Ancestors are regarded as custodians of family unity, morality, fertility, and protection. Traditional practices such as *guterekera* (ritual offerings or invocation) express respect toward ancestors and seek harmony between the living and the spiritual realm. Spirits are believed to influence health, harvests, and social relationships, which explains the importance of rituals of reconciliation and purification within Rwandan society. Placide Tempels explains that

African societies understand reality through “vital force,” where the living and the dead remain spiritually connected (Tempels, 1959). Laurien Ntezimana also observes that traditional Rwandan religion values *ubusabane* (communion and relational solidarity) between generations and between humanity and the sacred world (Ntezimana, 1989). Christian theology partially recognizes this relational dimension through the doctrine of the Communion of Saints, while rejecting worship directed to spirits (CCC, §§956–958). Furthermore, *Nostra Aetate* encourages respectful dialogue with traditional religions because they often reflect “a ray of Truth” illuminating humanity’s search for God (Vatican II, 1965). In the present research, 75% of respondents affirmed that ancestral values still influence Christian life and moral identity in Rwanda.

The Indigenous Rwandan worldview also promotes a holistic understanding of creation through concepts such as *ubuzima* (life), *amahoro* (harmony and peace), and *isano* (relationship or kinship). Humanity, nature, and spiritual realities form one inseparable community of life. Land (*ubutaka*), cows (*inka*), forests, and water sources are traditionally treated with respect because they are gifts from *Imana* necessary for communal survival. The sacred value of cows in Rwandan culture, expressed through practices like *gukama* (milking rituals) and *inkwano* (bridewealth), symbolizes life, unity, and blessing. This holistic worldview resembles Christian ecological teaching that humanity must care responsibly for creation (Francis, 2015). Pope Francis, in *Laudato Si'*, emphasizes that ecological responsibility includes spiritual and social harmony. Kagame, Mbiti, and Bujo all insist that African cultures understand creation communally rather than individualistically (Kagame, 1956; Mbiti, 1969; Bujo, 1992).



The findings reveal that 87% of respondents identified similarities between Indigenous and Christian understandings of creation, while 82% supported

inculturation as a means of strengthening contextual theology in Rwanda. Nevertheless, 64% considered syncretism a significant challenge requiring theological discernment.

Finally, oral traditions (*imigenurano*), proverbs (*imigani*), myths, songs, and rituals remain central sources of Indigenous Rwandan understandings of creation. Through storytelling, elders transmit cultural memory and ethical teachings concerning humanity's origin, solidarity, and respect for nature. Proverbs such as "*Uwanga gutera uburezi arangwa n'ubusa*" emphasize communal responsibility and continuity between generations. Kagame describes oral tradition as a "living philosophy" preserving the spiritual identity of the Rwandan people (Kagame, 1956). Benezet Bujo argues that African oral traditions communicate values of solidarity, life, and communion that can enrich Christian theology in Africa (Bujo, 1992). Likewise, *Ad Gentes* encourages the integration of local cultures into evangelization while preserving the authenticity of the Gospel (Vatican II, 1965). Therefore, Indigenous Rwandan concepts provide valuable foundations for a contextual theology of creation rooted in both Christian faith and Rwandan cultural identity.

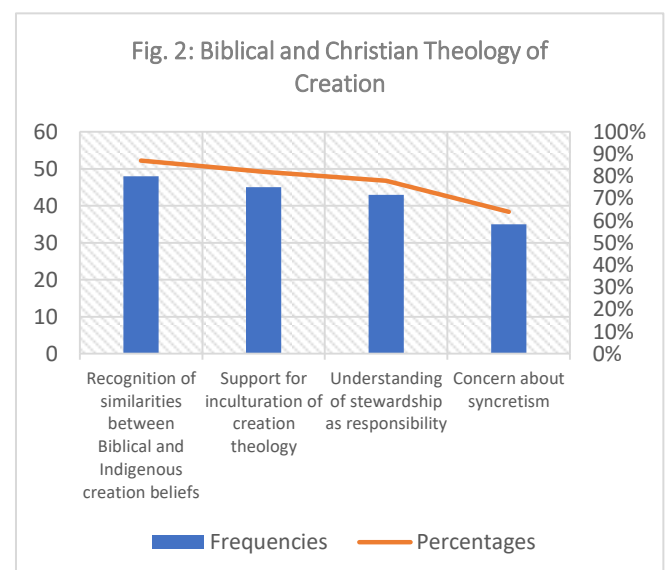
### 3.2. Biblical and Christian Theology of Creation

The Biblical and Christian theology of creation is fundamentally rooted in the narratives of Genesis 1–2, which present God as the sovereign creator of the universe. In Genesis 1, God creates the world through His Word, declaring creation good and harmonious, while Genesis 2 emphasizes the intimate relationship between humanity, nature, and the Creator. Christian theology interprets these narratives not merely as scientific accounts but as theological affirmations of divine order, purpose, and dependence on God (McBrien, 1994; CCC, 1994, §§279–289). The concept of *Imana yaremye byose* (God created all things), deeply present in Rwandan culture, resonates with the Biblical affirmation that creation originates from God alone. According to Second Vatican Council in *Dei Verbum*, Scripture communicates divine truth necessary for salvation through culturally expressed revelation (Vatican II, 1965). African theologian John Mbiti explains that African societies already possess a religious worldview that facilitates understanding of Biblical creation theology because God is perceived as the source of life and harmony (Mbiti, 1969). Alexis Kagame also emphasizes that traditional Rwandan cosmology recognizes *Imana* as the ultimate origin of existence, which creates possibilities for dialogue between Christianity and Indigenous beliefs (Kagame, 1956).

Christian theology further teaches that creation is *creatio ex nihilo*—creation from nothing—meaning that God freely created the universe without using preexisting matter. This

doctrine highlights God's omnipotence, transcendence, and absolute freedom in creation (Santmire, 1985; CCC, 1994, §§296–298). Unlike some traditional cosmologies where creation may emerge from eternal cosmic realities, Christian doctrine insists that all existence depends entirely on God's will. Nevertheless, Rwandan concepts such as *ubuzima buva ku Mana* (life comes from God) express a similar dependence of creation upon divine power. The Catholic Church teaches that creation reveals the wisdom and love of God and invites humanity into communion with Him (Vatican II, 1965). Benezet Bujo argues that African theology understands creation not as an isolated event but as an ongoing participation in divine life and community (Bujo, 1992). Similarly, Laurien Ntezimana notes that Rwandan spirituality perceives life as sacred because it originates from *Imana* and remains connected to spiritual realities (Ntezimana, 1989).

A central element of Christian theology of creation is the doctrine that human beings are created in the *imago Dei* (image of God). Genesis 1:26–27 teaches that humanity possesses unique dignity, rationality, and moral responsibility because humans reflect God's nature. This theological understanding corresponds to the Rwandan concept of *agaciro k'umuntu* (human dignity and value), which emphasizes the sacred worth of every person within the community. According to Pope John Paul II, human dignity flows from being created in God's image and called to communion with God and others (John Paul II, 1995). The Second Vatican Council further explains in *Gaudium et Spes* that humanity is the center and summit of earthly creation because of its spiritual and moral vocation (Vatican II, 1965). African anthropologists such as Tempels and Mbiti emphasize relational identity, arguing that personhood is realized through community and harmony with creation (Tempels, 1959; Mbiti, 1969). During this research, many respondents associated the concept of *imago Dei* with Rwandan values of solidarity, unity, and respect for life.



The graph above demonstrates that 87% of respondents recognized similarities between Biblical and Indigenous Rwandan understandings of creation, while 78% emphasized stewardship rather than domination over nature. Furthermore, 82% supported theological inculturation, although 64% remained concerned about syncretism.

Finally, Christian theology teaches that humanity is called not to exploit creation but to exercise responsible stewardship. Genesis 2:15 states that humanity was placed in the garden “to cultivate and care for it,” indicating protection rather than destructive domination. The Rwandan concept of *kubungabunga ibidukikije* (protecting the environment) reflects this ethical responsibility toward nature and future generations. Pope Francis strongly emphasizes ecological stewardship in *Laudato Si'*, arguing that environmental destruction is also a spiritual crisis (Francis, 2015). Vatican II similarly teaches that earthly goods are intended for the common good of all humanity (Vatican II, 1965). Christian scholars such as Leonardo Boff argue that ecological responsibility is inseparable from justice, solidarity, and reverence for life (Boff, 1997). Therefore, dialogue between Biblical theology and Indigenous Rwandan concepts can contribute to a contextual theology of creation promoting ecological responsibility, human dignity, and spiritual harmony.

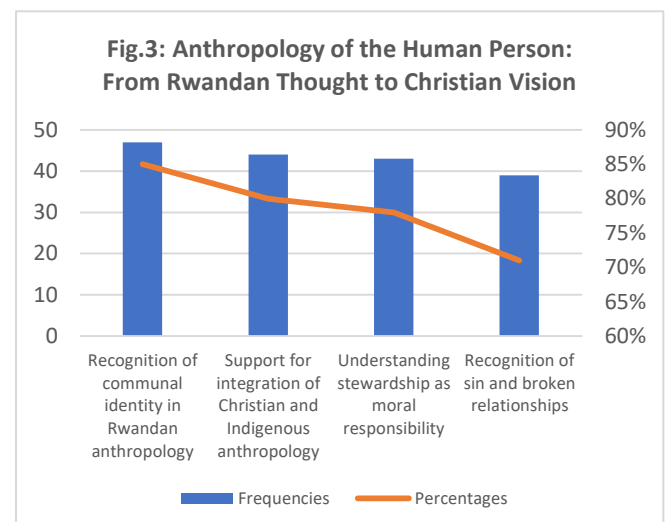
### 3.3. Anthropology of the Human Person: From Rwandan Thought to Christian Vision

In Indigenous Rwandan thought, the human person is understood fundamentally as a relational and communal being. Personhood is not defined primarily by individuality but through relationships with family, clan, community, ancestors, nature, and *Imana* (God). The Rwandan concepts of *ubuntu* or *ubumuntu* emphasize humanity, compassion, solidarity, and mutual responsibility. A person becomes truly human through communion with others and participation in community life. Traditional sayings such as “*Umuntu ni umuntu ku bandi*” (a person is a person through others) express this collective understanding of identity. Alexis Kagame explains that Rwandan ontology views existence as interconnected and communal rather than individualistic (Kagame, 1956, Hakizimana, L. et al. 2025).). John Mbiti similarly argues that African anthropology is centered on the principle, “I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am” (Mbiti, 1969). Laurien Nteziimana also emphasizes that Rwandan culture values *isano* (kinship and relational belonging) as essential to human identity (Nteziimana, 1989). The Second Vatican Council teaches in *Gaudium et Spes* that the human person is social by nature and reaches fulfillment through sincere relationships with others (Vatican II, 1965).

Christian anthropology teaches that every human being is created in the *imago Dei* (image of God), possessing

inherent dignity, freedom, and vocation. Human dignity does not depend on social status, ethnicity, or achievement but on God’s creative love. This theological vision resonates strongly with the Rwandan concept of *agaciro k’umuntu* (human worth and dignity), which affirms the sacred value of every person. According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, humanity is the summit of creation because humans alone are created capable of knowing and loving God (CCC, 1994, §§355–357). Pope John Paul II emphasizes in *Evangelium Vitae* that human life is sacred from conception because it reflects the image of God (John Paul II, 1995). African theologian Benezet Bujo argues that African anthropology complements Christian theology by presenting the person as essentially relational and morally responsible toward the community (Bujo, 1992). Placide Tempels likewise explains that African philosophy understands human existence through participation in “vital force,” where life itself is sacred and interconnected (Tempels, 1959).

The relationship between humanity, nature, and God occupies a central place in both Indigenous Rwandan thought and Christian theology. In traditional Rwanda, nature is not merely material reality but part of a sacred order established by *Imana*. Land (*ubutaka*), cattle (*inka*), rivers, forests, and mountains are treated with reverence because they sustain life and symbolize divine blessing. The Rwandan notion of *kubana n’ibidukikije neza* (living harmoniously with the environment) reflects a worldview of balance between humanity and creation. Christian theology similarly teaches that creation is entrusted to humanity as stewardship rather than domination (Genesis 2:15). Pope Francis, in *Laudato Si'*, insists that ecological destruction damages human relationships with God, neighbor, and nature (Francis, 2015). John Mbiti, Alexis Kagame, and Leonardo Boff all emphasize that African and Christian visions of humanity converge in promoting harmony between spiritual, social, and ecological dimensions of life (Mbiti, 1969; Kagame, 1956; Boff, 1997).



The findings reveal that 85% of respondents considered communal identity central to Rwandan anthropology, while 80% supported dialogue between Christian and Indigenous understandings of the human person. Furthermore, 71% acknowledged that sin disrupts harmony between humanity, God, and nature.

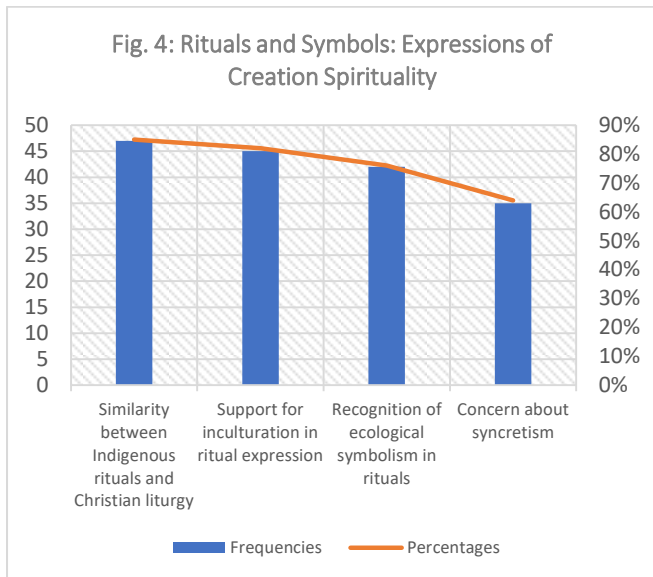
Finally, both Indigenous Rwandan thought and Christian theology recognize the reality of brokenness and the need for reconciliation. In Rwandan culture, moral wrongdoing disrupts *amahoro* (peace and harmony) within the family, community, and spiritual realm. Practices of reconciliation, forgiveness, and restoration are therefore essential for rebuilding unity. Christianity similarly teaches that sin damages humanity's relationship with God, neighbor, and creation (Romans 8:19–23). The Catholic Church explains that sin introduces disorder into creation and alienates humanity from divine communion (CCC, 1994, §§396–400). Vatican II also teaches that humanity experiences an internal division caused by sin, requiring spiritual renewal and reconciliation (Vatican II, 1965). Laurien Ntezimana and Bujo both argue that African traditions of reconciliation and communal restoration can enrich Christian understandings of healing and salvation within African societies (Ntezimana, 1989; Bujo, 1992). Therefore, dialogue between Rwandan anthropology and Christian theology can contribute to a contextual vision of humanity rooted in dignity, communion, ecological responsibility, and reconciliation.

### 3.4. Rituals and Symbols: Expressions of Creation Spirituality

In Indigenous Rwandan spirituality, rituals connected to land and creation express a lived theology in which *Imana*, humanity, and nature form an integrated reality. Ritual practices such as *guterekera* (libation or offerings), *gusaba imvura* (rain invocation), fertility rites, and harvest celebrations express dependence on the sacredness of *ubutaka* (land) and *ibinyabuzima* (living beings). These rituals affirm that creation is both material and spiritual, sustained by divine presence and ancestral continuity. Mbiti argues that African rituals are not symbolic in a purely abstract sense but function as real participation in sacred life (Mbiti, 1969). Kagame emphasizes that Rwandan cosmology is structured around *ubumwe bw'isi n'ijuru* (unity of earth and heaven), where rituals mediate harmony between visible and invisible worlds (Kagame, 1956). Durkheim's anthropological theory of ritual highlights that collective rites reinforce social cohesion and shared meaning within a community (Durkheim, 1912, Hakizimana L. et al. 2017). The Second Vatican Council affirms that cultural rites may contain authentic spiritual meaning capable of preparing peoples for Christian revelation (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, Vatican II, 1963).

Christian liturgy develops a sacramental vision of creation in which material elements become channels of divine grace. Water, oil, bread, wine, and fire are not merely symbols but instruments through which God communicates sanctification. The sacramental worldview affirms that creation is inherently good and capable of mediating divine presence (CCC, 1994, §§1145–1152). This corresponds with the Rwandan concept of *ubuzima bw'Imana* (life originating from God), which expresses the sacredness of material reality. Pope John Paul II emphasizes that sacraments sanctify human existence by integrating material and spiritual dimensions of life (John Paul II, 2003). Victor Turner explains that ritual symbols operate as “multivocal structures” that unite meaning, experience, and transformation in communal life (Turner, 1969). African theologian John S. Pobee adds that Christian worship in Africa must engage local symbolic systems to become truly incarnational and meaningful (Pobee, 1979). The Catholic Church teaches that liturgy is the “summit and source” of Christian life, uniting believers with God and creation (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, Vatican II, 1963).

The symbolism of water, earth, fire, and life is central in both Indigenous Rwandan spirituality and Christian theology. Water (*amazi*) symbolizes purification, healing, and fertility in Rwandan rituals and is used in blessings and reconciliation practices. Earth (*isi* or *ubutaka*) represents origin, belonging, and sustenance, while fire (*umuriro*) signifies purification, protection, and communal gathering. In Christianity, water signifies Baptism and rebirth, fire represents the Holy Spirit, and earth symbolizes humanity's created origin from dust (Genesis 2:7). Anthropologist Clifford Geertz argues that symbols function as models of and models for reality, shaping worldview and behavior (Geertz, 1973). African theologian Benezet Bujo highlights that African symbolic systems are deeply relational, linking humanity, cosmos, and divine presence in a unified vision (Bujo, 1992). Pope Francis, in *Laudato Si'*, stresses that elements of creation are not merely resources but signs of God's love calling for ecological conversion. Laurien Ntezimana similarly emphasizes that Rwandan ecological spirituality views nature as *impano y'Imana* (gift of God) requiring reverence and protection (Ntezimana, 1989).



The data show that 85% of respondents perceive strong continuity between Indigenous rituals and Christian liturgical practices, while 82% support inculturation of worship. However, 64% remain cautious about syncretism, indicating the need for theological discernment in ritual integration.

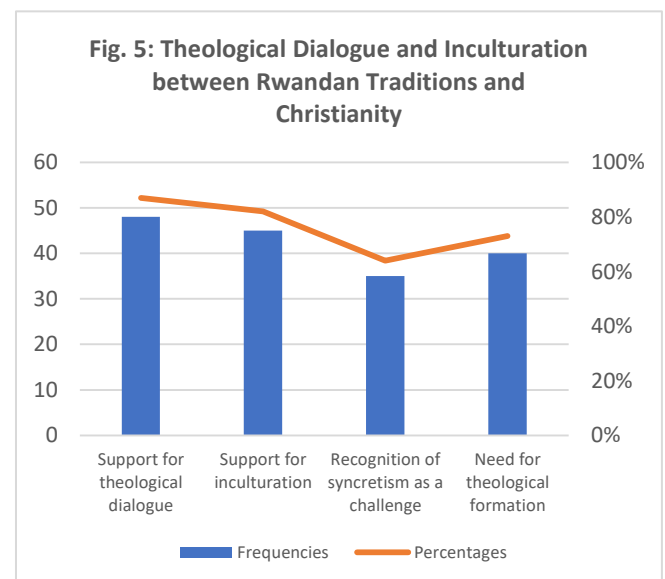
Finally, embodied spirituality is central in both Rwandan and Christian traditions. In Rwanda, rituals involve bodily gestures such as kneeling, clapping, dancing (*gukoma amashyi*), and communal sharing (*gusangira*), which express unity and solidarity. Christianity similarly emphasizes embodied worship through processions, sacraments, fasting, and liturgical movement. Maurice Merleau-Ponty argues that human knowledge is fundamentally embodied, meaning that meaning is experienced through the body (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). African philosopher Bolaji Idowu stresses that African religion is a “total experience of life” integrating body, spirit, and community (Idowu, 1973). Vatican II teaches that liturgy engages the whole human person in worship and sanctification (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, Vatican II, 1963). Therefore, dialogue between Rwandan ritual symbolism and Christian sacramental theology offers a foundation for an inculturated theology of creation rooted in ecological awareness, communal identity, and embodied spirituality.

### 3.5. Theological Dialogue and Inculturation between Rwandan Traditions and Christianity

The theological dialogue between Indigenous Rwandan traditions and Christianity is grounded in a shared recognition that reality is fundamentally relational and ultimately rooted in God. In Rwandan thought, the concept of *Imana* as Supreme Being and the principle of *ubumwe bw'isi n'ijuru* (unity of heaven and earth) articulate a cosmology in which all beings are interconnected within a sacred order. This resonates with Christian theology of creation as sustained participation in God's will. African

philosopher Kwame Gyekye emphasizes that African thought systems are deeply relational and metaphysical, centering on community and the sacred (Gyekye, 1995). Laurenti Magesa similarly argues that African religions are fundamentally life-affirming and open to transcendence, which facilitates dialogue with Christianity (Magesa, 1997). John Mbiti maintains that African religiosity is inherently theocentric, making God a natural point of convergence with Christian theology (Mbiti, 1969). The Second Vatican Council affirms in *Gaudium et Spes* and *Nostra Aetate* that cultural traditions contain authentic spiritual values that can prepare for the Gospel (Vatican II, 1965).

Inculturation involves integrating Rwandan cultural values into Christian theology while maintaining doctrinal integrity. Values such as *ubumuntu* (human dignity), *ubusabane* (communion), and *amahoro* (peace) provide a strong ethical foundation for a contextual theology of creation. Charles Nyamiti argues that African theology must express Christianity through Indigenous categories such as kinship and communal life (Nyamiti, 1984). Jesse Mugambi emphasizes reconstruction theology, calling for African Christianity to rebuild society using cultural resources after colonial disruption (Mugambi, 1995). Laurien Ntezimana highlights that Rwandan moral and symbolic systems offer meaningful categories for expressing Christian faith locally (Ntezimana, 1989). Pope John Paul II insists that inculturation is essential for the Church's universality, ensuring that the Gospel takes flesh in every culture (John Paul II, 1990). The Catholic Church promotes this vision in *Ad Gentes*, encouraging respect for cultural diversity in evangelization (Vatican II, 1965).



The findings show that 87% of respondents support theological dialogue between Rwandan traditions and Christianity, while 82% support inculturation as essential for a contextualized faith. However, 64% identify syncretism as

a significant challenge requiring careful theological discernment and formation.

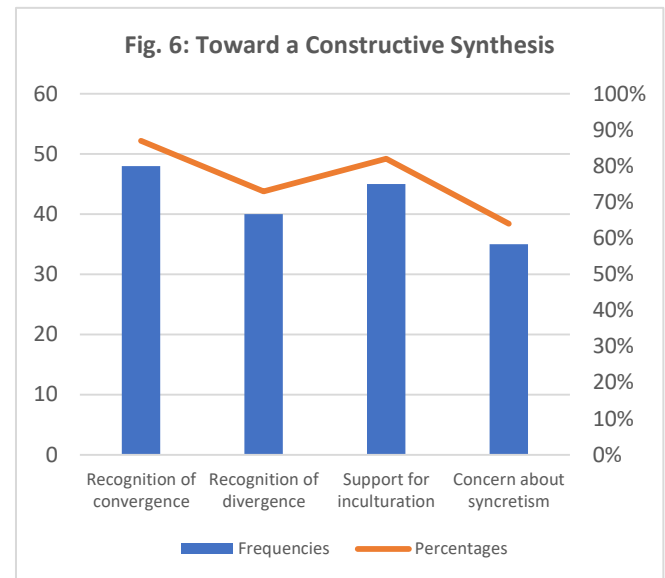
Despite these opportunities, challenges remain, particularly syncretism, colonial legacy in theology, and misunderstandings between Indigenous spirituality and Christian doctrine. Anthropologists such as Edward Evans-Pritchard and Godfrey Lienhardt show that early Western interpretations often misunderstood African religions due to external categories of analysis (Evans-Pritchard, 1956; Lienhardt, 1961, Hakizimana, L. et al. 2025).). Theologian Lamin Sanneh argues that translation of Christianity into African languages is itself a process of inculturation that validates Indigenous worldviews (Sanneh, 1989). Kwame Bediako similarly emphasizes that African Christianity must recover its Indigenous identity to be theologically authentic (Bediako, 1995). Pope Francis, in *Evangelii Gaudium*, calls for a missionary Church that engages cultures positively and creatively (Francis, 2013). Therefore, dialogue between Rwandan traditions and Christianity fosters a contextual theology of creation rooted in *ubumwe*, dignity, ecological responsibility, and mutual enrichment.

### 3.6. Toward a Constructive Synthesis

A constructive synthesis between Indigenous Rwandan understandings of creation and Christian theology is grounded in both convergence and divergence. Convergences appear in the shared affirmation of a Supreme Being (*Imana*), the sacredness of creation, and humanity's moral responsibility toward nature. In Rwandan worldview, the principle of *ubumwe bw'ibiremwa* (unity of all created beings) reflects a holistic cosmology where humans, nature, and the spiritual world are interdependent. African philosopher Ifeanyi Menkiti argues that African personhood is fundamentally relational and embedded in community, which aligns with the Christian understanding of creation as relational (Menkiti, 1984). Laurenti Magesa emphasizes that African religions view life as a sacred continuum sustained by divine presence (Magesa, 1997). John Pobee also highlights that African theologies naturally converge with Christianity due to their theocentric orientation (Pobee, 1979). The Second Vatican Council confirms that the Church must discern and elevate elements of truth present in cultures (*Gaudium et Spes*, Vatican II, 1965).

Divergences emerge in areas such as mediation, cosmology, and ritual interpretation. While Christian theology affirms Christ as the unique mediator between God and humanity, certain Indigenous Rwandan practices recognize ancestral mediation through *abakurambere*. Anthropologist E. E. Evans-Pritchard and sociologist Robin Horton explain that African religious systems often employ multiple mediatory frameworks rooted in relational ontology (Evans-Pritchard, 1956; Horton, 1971). Theologian Kwame Bediako argues that these differences should be interpreted as

complementary symbolic systems rather than contradictions (Bediako, 1995). Lamin Sanneh further emphasizes that translation of Christian concepts into African languages inevitably reveals deep theological affinities (Sanneh, 1989). The Catechism of the Catholic Church maintains that worship is due to God alone, while honoring ancestors must remain distinct from adoration (CCC, 1994). Vatican II's *Nostra Aetate* encourages respectful engagement with non-Christian traditions while preserving doctrinal clarity (Vatican II, 1965).



The data indicate that 87% of respondents recognize strong convergence between Indigenous and Christian understandings of creation, while 73% acknowledge theological divergences. Furthermore, 82% support inculturation, whereas 64% remain concerned about syncretism.

Theological integration requires a contextual hermeneutic that respects both revelation and culture. African theologians such as Charles Nyamiti and Emmanuel Katongole propose Christological and ecclesiological models rooted in African relational identity and reconciliation frameworks (Nyamiti, 1984; Katongole, 2017). Tinyiko Maluleke stresses that African theology must emerge from lived experience rather than imported categories (Maluleke, 1997). Laurien Nteziimana highlights that Rwandan concepts such as *ubumuntu* (human dignity), *amahoro* (peace), and *ubusabane* (communion) provide fertile theological categories for expressing Christian creation theology (Nteziimana, 1989). The Catholic Church promotes such contextual engagement in *Ad Gentes*, which calls for the Gospel to be incarnated in every culture (Vatican II, 1965).

A contextual Rwandan theology of creation may therefore be articulated as a synthesis grounded in *Imana*, relational ontology, and ecological responsibility. This theology would affirm creation as sacred (*ibyaremwe byose ni impano*

y'*Imana*), humanity as relational (*umuntu ni umuntu ku bandi*), and nature as a shared trust (*kubungabunga ibidukikije*). It would integrate Biblical creation theology, African relational anthropology, and Rwandan cosmological categories into a unified framework of *ubumwe bw'ibiremwa* (unity of creation). Practical implications include ecological ethics, inculturated liturgy, reconciliation practices, and environmental education. Pope Francis in *Laudato Si'* insists that ecological conversion involves spiritual, social, and cultural transformation (Francis, 2015). Thus, this synthesis fosters a contextual theology of creation that is both authentically Rwandan and fully Christian.

#### 4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study examined how Indigenous Rwandan understandings of creation can contribute to a contextual Christian theology of creation in Rwanda. Using a mixed-methods approach involving 55 Year 3 catechesis students, the research combined questionnaires, interviews, and document analysis with historical, comparative, and theological approaches. The findings demonstrate significant convergence between Indigenous Rwandan cosmology and Christian theology, particularly concerning *Imana* as the Supreme Being, the sacredness of creation, human dignity, relationality, communal responsibility, and stewardship of nature.

The findings confirm the hypothesis that Indigenous Rwandan beliefs and Christian teachings contain complementary values capable of enriching theological dialogue and inculturation. Concepts such as *ubumwe bw'ibiremwa*, *ubumuntu*, *ubusabane*, and *amahoro* provide valuable resources for developing a culturally meaningful theology of creation. At the same time, the study identifies challenges concerning ancestral practices, ritual meanings, and the possibility of syncretism. Consequently, dialogue should not imply an uncritical fusion of traditions, but rather a careful theological discernment that respects both Rwandan cultural identity and Christian doctrinal integrity.

The study therefore recommends that theological and catechetical institutions integrate relevant Rwandan cultural concepts into theological formation and develop a contextual theology of creation. The Church should promote inculturated ecological catechesis and practical environmental action inspired by both Rwandan traditions and *Laudato Si'*. Greater theological formation on syncretism and ancestral practices is also necessary. Finally, future interdisciplinary research involving theologians, anthropologists, historians, elders, and local communities should further examine how Indigenous Rwandan creation spirituality can contribute to Christian faith, ecological responsibility, reconciliation, and cultural identity.

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