

In the Shadow

For four short months Grace and I lived among the Brethren in Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda and Uganda. In so many ways we grew close to them and grew to love them dearly. Because I had visited there a number of times over the past few years, I figured I had a pretty good handle on the culture. Hang out some place for a while and find out how much you don't know! As our farm veterinarian told me many years ago, "The longer I'm in this business, the less I know."

It is really amazing to me the difference in cultural understanding that comes from a visit of one or two weeks versus four months. Now I am sure it is years that's needed. A major component of it is the language. When someone does their thinking in one language - their heart language - and are translating those thoughts into another language, the thoughts simply do not convey accurately. There is so much of the nuance and descriptiveness that gets left in the dust.

When preaching or teaching, I would say a few sentences, stop talking, wait for my interpreter to say a few sentences, then move on. Occasionally, the interpreter would stop me and say that he wants to "explain it well." Then he would proceed in Kinyarwanda, Kirundi, etc. with a few paragraphs. What this tells me is that every language - every culture - has ways of describing things that aren't a simple word-for-word exchange.

Grace has mentioned in her writing that sometimes the differences and misunderstandings are annoying and sometimes they are amusing. Sometimes it depends on the mood I'm in. Being an American and wanting to be on time can lead to annoyance with people that don't really care what time it is. Watching someone trying to locate lost or misplaced items can be hilarious. Last week as we were leaving the village to head for the airport in Kigali, Papa Timo had the revelation that the lug wrench was in the other car. We were only a kilometer or so from home yet, but rather than turning back to pick it up, he called Mama Timo. There was a rapid exchange of Kinyarwanda as he tried to explain exactly what he was looking for and where it was located. Then we parked at the end of the road and waited until the carpenter that had been working on Papa Timo's chicken house ran out the road to bring it to us. It was perfectly fine and likely faster than driving, considering the road's condition. Just not the way I would have done it.

Well, now we're back in the US. But we're still living in the shadow. The shadow of Mt. Niyirigongo. The shadow of the Church of the Brethren in the Africa Great Lakes. The shadow of the Almighty God. It's a great place to be.

For the Master, Chris Elliott - in the US - but in my heart still with the Church of the Brethren in the Africa Great Lakes.

