**The myths about lightning in Rwanda**

To many, rain is a blessing and a need that the ecosystem needs to survive. Despite its significance, rain sometimes causes accidents, death or destruction of people and property.

By [Steven Muvunyi](https://www.newtimes.co.rw/profile/steven-muvunyi)  Published : October 09, 2016

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There are various myths connected to lightning among Rwandans. Some beliefs connect lightning with witchcraft. “Inkuba itagira amazi” which loosely means ‘dry lightning.’ this lightning strikes even when it is not raining.

Centuries ago “Gakubitwe n’inkuba” (to be struck by lightning) was considered a curse and many feared it.

75 year-old Historian, Jean Damascene Rwasamirera said some Rwandans believed or still believes that lightning is an animal that looks like a rooster and that it has the power to kill.

“Rwandans were frightened by lightning. They never called it by its name “Inkuba” but rather “Umwami wo hejuru” (king from above) lest they infuriate it. While it was raining, they would remain standing in houses and could not sit since the seat was reserved for the king. You cannot sit when the king is present. That was considered disrespect for him”.

Rwandans could also not smoke in the rain. They had to restrain themselves from smoking; otherwise, they had to wrap the tobacco pipe with herbs and smoke. They also believed that a tree called “Umuduha” (Candelabra) was very dangerous in the rain as it attracted lightning,” he said

When cows or other domestic animals were killed by lightning, they would not be eaten before people called “Abagangahuzi” performed rituals known as “Kugangahura” to exorcise the animals. During the process, they did what they called “gutera ibyuhagiro” or cleansing.

“Kugangahura” was also performed to ‘heal’ victims of lightning or cleanse those killed. People could not touch a body of someone killed by lightening before these rituals were done. The ritual was also meant to chase lightning so that it never comes back to strike,” Rwasamirera said

Rwasamirera further adds that Rwandans had their own way of immunizing themselves against thunder.

“They took a medicine called “Isubyo” and were guaranteed protection against thunder,” he said.

Modeste Rutangarwamaboko, a traditional healer and founder of Rwandan Cultural Psychotherapy, also said ‘Isubyo’ was a tree whose leaves were mixed with other herbs to help people reduce the risk of being struck by lightning.

“When someone was killed by lightning, people never cried, they instead drummed and celebrated, with the belief that the king from above had married,” he says.

Rutangarwamaboko says he believes in the scientific and traditional explanation behind the cause and cure of lighting and says scientists should not ignore what our traditions say about lighting.

“There are some phenomena that scientists cannot explain. They should therefore not reject all cultural beliefs. Scientifically, lightning happens and can be proven. Thus culturists should not always consider lightning a mystery or witchcraft but scientists should also not dismiss how our forefathers treated lighting victims,” he said.

According to Dr. Jean Uwamahoro, lecturer of Physics at University of Rwanda’s college of education, lightning is an electric discharge between the atmosphere and the earth.

“It occurs when positive charges meet negative ones in the clouds or on the ground. Regions with the highest altitudes are the most prone to lightning since there are more clouds there,” he said.

He explained that there are two types of lightening: cloud to cloud or intra-cloud and cloud to ground. The latter is more dangerous and is the one that touches the ground and kills people.

“Lightning is common when it’s raining. But it may occur even when it’s not,” he added.