Mzungu!

Prepared by Nathan L Morrison for Sunday December 11th, 2022

Text: John 17:13-18

### Intro

1. Have you ever had a real “In the world, not of the world” experience?
   1. Have you ever been to a place where it became so painfully obvious that you are a foreigner, you are an alien, you are an outsider?
   2. You are NOT from here, but you are here now.
   3. Anyone ever had a trip like that or a moment like that or a semester like that?
2. Spending the first half of September in Tanzania was certainly an “in, not of” experience for me and my preacher friends who went with me
3. One of the words we heard a lot, from Christians and non-Christians was, “Mzungu” and “Wazungu.”
   1. Me and the two other American preachers, Andrew Roberts and Ed Smith said, “Mzungus.”
   2. Andrew asked Zuberi, “What is Mzungu?” And he smiled and he said, “Oh nothing bad. It just means white man. We don’t call you white because white is the color of paper and you are not that. So we say Mzungu.”
   3. Andrew was intrigued and so he looked it up and regaled us at breakfast the next morning with his research.
4. “Mzungu, literally translated, means a person who walks in circles. It is the name reserved for Westerners and it is advisable to abandon any irritation with the tag early in your stay: depending on the length of your visit you might hear it thousands of times.” – *Tanzania: Customs & Cultures*, 50
   1. That was no joke by the way. People in markets shout “Hey, Mzungu!” & would promise to give us “Tanzania price, not Mzungu price;” and little children in the street, sang “mzungu, mzungu” as they ran by us. We’d say “Jambo!” (“Hello!” or “Greetings!”)
   2. The etymology of the word is hilarious. It came about when White men started showing up to colonize east Africa in the 1700s and 1800s. These Europeans did not speak the language, they looked lost and confused all the time. They walked in circles until they became dizzy. And so it’s dizzy-headed people, so overwhelmed, so confused by the strange surroundings. They do not fit in. They are not from here.
   3. We were the only Caucasians around anywhere we went. We did not speak Swahili, we had to use translators. We tried not to wear any flashy clothes or stand out or attract attention to ourselves. But just being there, we stood out.
5. Andrew pointed us to a couple of articles, one written by an Ex-pat in Uganda about her experience as a Mzungu, another by a reporter in Rwanda.
   1. Both said, Mzungu is not just about the color of your skin.
   2. The word was also used to describe mannerisms, appearance, and behavior.
6. Allan Brian Ssenyonga, a Ugandan reporter in Rwanda wrote about the Mzungu in The New Times, called, *“Yes it’s obvious, you are a mzungu.”* *(Article below)* (<https://www.newtimes.co.rw/article/24870/yes-its-obvious-you-are-a-mzungu>)
   1. “There is the ‘budget’ Mzungu. This one is often seen with a huge dirty backpack, a sun hat, sunglasses, and a digital camera in hand, and he/she occasionally stops to check on their map to see if they are heading in the right direction.”
   2. Their Mzungu-ness is often exhibited by their ability to tell the different coffee flavors apart. whereas locals know there is coffee and tea and both are better with milk.
   3. A Mzungu is only seen reading 1 of 2 books, either a huge volume on Africa or a book precisely about the 1994 Rwandan Genocide.
   4. A Mzungu has to respond to emails from concerned loved ones back in Europe and America asking them if they are doing OK in Africa (not Rwanda, not Unganda, not Tanzania).
   5. “The only downside to being Mzungu, is that the locals especially those selling crafts, tend to have a different, often higher price for you.”
   6. “An inquisitive eye will notice a water bottle sticking from the side of the laptop bag they carry. A Mzungu always carries his water with him.” – We left the hotel with 2 or 3 bottles every day!
   7. “The Mzungu will not forget to swallow his anti-malarial tablets or smear themselves with mosquito repelling lotion.” – We took our anti-malarial pills every day and checked on one another to make sure each one did as well.
   8. “[Mzungu] dress style often revolves around T-shirts and jeans or multi-pocket tour trousers plus sandals. Some simply wear flip-flops (considered bathroom wear by locals) as they stroll on the clean streets…” – As Andrew read this part to Ed and I, Andrew and I realized the pants we wore had about 50 pockets! Then one of them put his feet out from under the table where we sat and he had on flip-flops: red, white and blue colored no less! We all pointed at each other and said at the same time, “Mzungu!”
7. Without trying, without even thinking about it, we stood out for our mannerisms, our appearance and our behavior. A Mzungu stands out in ways he doesn’t even realize.
   1. There was a lot more to it than the color of our skin. Being white is obvious.
   2. The Tanzanian people are a friendly people and a hospitable people.
   3. And the brethren were wonderful; they took good care of us.
   4. But there’s no hiding and there’s no denying that I am a “Mzungu.”
8. I was in that world, but I was not of that world. And that wasn’t some little secret knowledge I hid in my heart, “You guys don’t know this but I’m different,” rather it was obvious to the world, I was not of it. To the degree, I could not hide it if I wanted to hide it. I gave myself away in so many ways – ways I did not even realize!
9. John 17:13-18:
   1. 13.  “But now I come to You; and these things I speak in the world so that they may have My joy made full in themselves.
   2. 14.  “I have given them Your word; and the world has hated them, because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world.
   3. 15.  “I do not ask You to take them out of the world, but to keep them from the evil one.
   4. 16.  “They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world.
   5. 17.  “Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth.
   6. 18.  “As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world.”
10. As I reflect upon the Lord’s prayer in John 17:13-18, I hope this is the sort of Christian that I am. I hope this is the sort of Christian you are.
    1. So distinctly Christian, so deeply Christian, so genuinely a Christian, that it shines forth in ways you don’t even realize and the world sees and the world knows you are different.
    2. You are a child of God. And it’s known in your mannerisms and appearance and attitudes and behavior.
11. You are Distinct! That is what I want to encourage you to be today: To be in the world, but not of the world. Be Distinct!

#### Christians, Embrace Your Distinction

1. When you finally figure out what a Mzungu is and you have to laugh because you are a Mzungu all over! You embrace it. It’s freeing. You are what you are in this different world and culture.
2. Many ways the Lord tells us to be distinct. You are distinct in Jesus.
3. Salt of the earth (Matthew 5:13): Salt flavors the food. Salt contacts the food. But the salt is distinct.
4. Light of the world (Matthew 5:14-16): Darkness is absence of light. Darkness does not comprehend the light. Darkness is driven back by the light.
5. A city on a hill (Matthew 5:14): Cannot hide!
6. God’s special people (I Peter 2:9-10): A Peculiar people, a distinct people.
7. Sojourners and Pilgrims (I Peter 2:11-12): “This world is not my home. I’m just passing through” (This World Is Not My Home, 1937 hymn by Albert E. Brumley).
   1. Like Abraham always dwelt in tents, he was journeying, following God wherever God led him.
8. Why are we tempted to blend-in with the world at times?
9. Do we think people or friends will like us more if we hide our faith?
10. Are we afraid people will hate us or persecute us if they learn of our convictions?
11. Do we think this world is where it’s at? Get the best stuff now and have the most fun now and look out for number 1 now because this is all that there is? ***We know better.***
12. Christians cannot hide. A City on a Hill (Matthew 5:14). When I walked down a road in Dar es Salaam, strangers called, greeted me, waived “Mzungu”. I could not hide. Christian, you don’t hide. You stand out. As Christians we will stand out!
13. Their appearance is modest (I Timothy 2:9-10): You might not always wear pants with 50 pockets like a Mzungu. But your dress is appropriate to an occasion and mindful that your body belongs to the Lord and so you honor Him and respect yourself by the way you dress.
14. Their speech is appropriate (Philippians 2:14-15; Colossians 4:5-6; Ephesians 4:15, 29-31; I Peter 2:1): Peter swore and cursed to demonstrate that he wasn’t with Jesus (Mark 14:71). Christians’ speech is to be in love, seasoned with grace and for edification (encouragement and building up). A saint won’t blend in for even their speech gives them away!
15. Their manner of life is commendable, “Having your conduct honorable among the gentiles” (I Peter 2:11-12):
16. Honest work and dealings (Col. 3:22-25; I Pet. 2:18-19).
17. Marriage, not fornication/cohabitation (Heb. 13:4). In our culture today, marriage is a public testament to faith, to your conviction of living according to God’s Word. The world won’t make you get married. There is no stigma to shacking up, in fact, many people in the world celebrate it as the next step in a relationship. Or our culture devalues marriage by serial marriage, divorce, remarriage. How special is a 50th anniversary?
18. Raising children (Eph. 6:1-4): Kids will be kids and there are no perfect children just like there are no perfect parents. However, a Christian home stands out when your kids have friends from school over or neighborhood kids come over to play. Growing up, friends thought it was so weird that my family ate dinner together at one table, and that we prayed before the meal. Their family never did those things…. MZUNGU! Your friends can see the difference.
19. Their hearts are generous – loving neighbors and enemies (Mark 12:29-31; Matthew 5:43-44): *Zuberi and the water story with his Muslim neighbors.* There are Christians in America! They care about Christians in other places. God, through His word teaches us how to treat each other and treat our neighbors.
20. We cannot be ashamed of who we are in Christ. Embrace the distinction. We cannot be otherwise. It will come out anyway. It’s shining in ways you don’t think about!

#### Christians, Protect Your Distinction

1. A Mzungu is dizzied, perplexed by all surroundings. “It’s a strange place for him.” What a Good analogy for Christians. Don’t become comfortable with this world, with this society and culture and all of its ways. Don’t be a chameleon that blends in with any sort of surrounding.
2. What if we lose our distinction? What if we become like the world? What if our mind and behavior simply mirrors the culture around us?
3. Salt loses savor (Matthew 5:13): Cast under foot. No good to the Lord or anybody.
4. Light under a basket (Matthew 5:14-15): Futile.
5. Lukewarm to the taste (Revelation 3:15-16): What will the Lord think of us? Vomit it out.
6. Protect your senses to notice sin and discern temptation. There is virtue in being vexed and pained by the wickedness of this world (II Peter 2:7-8: Lot). It helps us remember how precious the gospel is and how important it is that we stay true to the Lord.
7. Ears hurt by blasphemy and cursing (James 3:10): It’s scary when you stop hearing it. You catch yourself just singing along with the radio one day and it hits you – this song calls women bad names or is all about drinking at clubs or glorifies immorality or takes the name of the Lord in Vain.
8. Able to blush at lewd and lasciviousness, immorality (Jeremiah 6:15; 8:12): Israelites had lost all shame in their abominations. Nothing embarrassed them anymore. We live in a culture of screens and video, streaming services, etc. and we are bombarded with countless images, everywhere we turn. There is a desensitizing effect very quickly. The Tinder Dating App phenomenon of a couple of years ago: swipe Left or Swipe Right.
   1. A preacher friend of mine had a single Preacher Intern that had it on his phone. The preacher told him, “I think you ought to get rid of that one.” The intern didn’t see what the big deal was.
   2. The preacher said, “Do you think the sisters are putting their pictures on there?” He said, “No.”
   3. The preacher friend of mine continued, “How do you think the sisters would feel to know that you make these judgments about women solely on their looks?” He hadn’t thought about that.
   4. Apps like that are training people to objectify other people and once you are objectifying people, there won’t be much you’ll blush at.
9. Righteous Indignation is healthy (II Corinthians 11:29): When we see sin and evil, do we think it’s funny, do we cheer it on? Or does it trouble us, vex us, even anger us?
10. Expose works of darkness (Ephesians 5:8-12): Don’t become desensitized.
11. Don’t befriend the world; be distinct (James 4:4-5; I John 2:15-17): That Mzungu is just dizzy being in that strange place. Let’s stay dizzy, let’s stay bewildered.
12. May the Lust of Eyes, Lust of Flesh, Pride of Life be strange places for Christians!

#### Christians, Confess Your Distinction

1. In Tanzania, the people want to meet a Mzungu. They want to have what he/she has.
   1. The culture book explains, the people call out to you not to embarrass or scare you but because they want to be noticed.
   2. They’d like to meet you, make friends with you, maybe do business with you.
   3. There is an impression that a Mzungu has bottomless pockets.
2. People in the world want what a Christian has. Because a Christian is distinct. Light draws you in. Salt is good. City on a hill has protection.
3. When they see you have goodness, righteousness, and truth (Ephesians 5:9: Fruit of the Light).
4. When they see you have Love, Joy, Peace, Patience, Kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control (Galatians 5:21-23: Fruit of the Spirit).
5. When they see you have a living Hope (I Peter 1:3).
6. These are the things that come out in your mannerisms, speech, behavior, and attitudes.
7. These things are hard to hide and come out in ways we don’t realize.
8. Someone may say to you “I want what you have.” “What is your secret?” Tell them, “I am a Christian. That’s why I have what I have” (I Peter 3:15).
9. Matthew 10:32-33; I Peter 3:15; Colossians 4:5-6
10. People will ask you, what is the reason for your hope?
11. People have questions about living like a Christian and the teachings of a Christian.
12. People will ask you, are you a Christian?
13. Confess your distinction as you confess Jesus by the way you live your life! *(Matthew 10:32)*

## Conclusion

1. We are in the world but we are not of the World (John 17:15-16). This world can be a dizzying place for anyone, but it should be especially for Christians.
   1. This world is not our home: Our citizenship is in Heaven (Philippians 3:20)
2. A Caucasian in Africa is a “Mzungu” and stands out.
3. A Christian, no matter their ethnicity or background will stand out and be distinct.
   1. Embrace the distinction
   2. Protect the distinction
   3. Confess the distinction
4. In this world, wherever we go, let us stand out for belonging to Jesus and being a Christian!
5. If you are not a Christian, you need to be. Repent and be baptized into His name!
6. If a Christian in error, don’t wait till it’s eternally too late. Repent and be renewed!
7. Whatever your requests, let them be made known ***NOW*** while we stand & sing!

<https://www.newtimes.co.rw/article/24870/yes-its-obvious-you-are-a-mzungu>

Logo



Allan Brian Ssenyonga

Saturday, August 29, 2009

A friend of mine recently asked me an interesting question. During our conversation she became quite aware of the fact that I was constantly referring to her and people like her as Mzungu.

She wanted to know whether the term was in any way derogatory.

I promptly gave her a detailed explanation concerning the etymology of the word. For those who were not privy to my coffee break with Emily, the word basically refers to a white person particularly from Europe, Australia, and North America.

It is never used to refer to South East Asians, Indians or even albinos. And it is not at all derogatory.

The plural for Mzungu is Wazungu and not Mzungus. This mistake is often made by those who try to apply English grammar rules by adding a ‘s’ at the end of the word.

The word is derived from a contraction of words meaning “one who moves around,” and was coined to describe Europeans who traveled through East Africa in the 18th century.

A month ago, a Canadian friend of mine asked me [why] young children were calling her Mzungu yet she was not even white. My response was that her mannerisms and appearance easily gave her away as a foreigner (Mzungu).

Therefore the word does not simply denote skin colour but also behaviour.

Having lived all my life in East Africa, I have over time gained the necessary skills that now enable me to easily identify peculiar Mzungu behaviour. Kigali has got a good number of white people.

Some are tourists, business people, missionaries, humanitarian workers, journalists, or embassy staff.

Interestingly, they all seem to be united by the way they go about their business here this goes along way in aiding locals to identify them. While here, most of them prefer to reside in upscale Kigali neighbourhoods like Kimihurura, Kacyiru, Kiyovu or in the different hotels around town.

They love these neighbourhoods because they are close to town and are relatively more organised than other parts of Kigali. It is quite rare to find an Mzungu living in places like Gatsata or Gikondo.

There is also the ‘budget’ Mzungu. This one is often seen with a huge dirty backpack, a sun hat, sun glasses, and a digital camera in hand, and he/she occasionally stops to check on their map to see if they are heading in the right direction.

Their dress style often revolves around T-shirts and jeans or multi-pocket tour trousers plus sandals. Some simply wear flip-flops (considered bathroom wear by locals) as they stroll on the clean streets of Kigali.

During the day, a typical Mzungu is likely to be found hanging out at any of the Bourbon Coffee outlets in town.

Others will be found at Blues café adjacent to the Union Trade Centre and several hotel lobbies. With a cup of coffee on the side, they type away at their branded laptops (Apple, Dell, Gateway, HP, or a Compaq).

Their Mzungu-ness is often exhibited by their ability to tell the different coffee flavours apart.

Most of us (locals) cannot tell much of the difference when it comes to things like espresso macchiato, cappuccino, café latte/mocha, white choco mocha etc. All we know is that there is tea and coffee, and either of the two could be in water or milk period.

A sneak peek at their screens often reveals efforts to load pictures from a gorilla tracking trip onto their Facebook pages.

Others will be busy trying to respond to emails from concerned loved ones back in Europe and America asking whether they are doing ok in Africa (not Rwanda!).

Those not surfing the internet, can be seen enjoying the tropical sun while reading one of the huge volume books about Africa or precisely about the 1994 Genocide.

Once they leave their small comfort pads in the coffee shops, they pack their laptops in their laptop bags and call over a motorcycle for a ride back home.

They seem to know a fixed price, and any deviation by the rider is often taken to be a sign of a local trying to take advantage of them.

Meanwhile, an inquisitive eye will notice a water bottle sticking from the side of the laptop bag. These guys always carry their water with them.

I wonder whether it has to do with Western media’s obsession of Sub-Saharan Africa being a place with no clean drinking water.

For those Wazungu interested in checking out Kigali’s night life, the following places are common destinations.

Torero’s, KBC’s Planet discotheque, Papyrus in Kimihurura, Carwash Executive and a few will be found at Laico Umubano hotel (former Novotel) for the live music performances.

In the comfort of their Kigali homes, the Mzungu will not forget to swallow his anti-malarial tablets or to smear themselves with mosquito repelling lotions before they go to bed.

The term Mzungu also often implies that one is bound to get preferential treatment from the locals. One day another Mzungu friend of mine offered me a lift to town.

When she hinted at dropping me off at a no-parking spot, I told her that she could get in trouble with the traffic cops. However, she simply shrugged it off by saying, “I am Mzungu and so I can plead innocence.”

The only downside to being Mzungu, is that the locals especially those selling crafts, tend to have a different, often higher price for you.

It is also not much fun being swarmed by street kids begging for money simply because one is white.

I hope the next time a small child calls out “bye Mzungu” you do not waste mental energy thinking of why they are saying so.

They, like me can easily tell that you are not typically from around here.

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About Allan Ssenyonga

I am a Ugandan freelance writer based in East Africa. I have an insatiable desire for understanding and trying to explain media, political, cultural and social dynamics.