

People of Kenya

Introduction: People of Africa

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Kikuyu

Samburu

Maasai (also commonly spelled Masai)

Turkana



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Introduction: People of Africa

The vast continent of Africa is so rich and diverse in its culture with it not only changing from one country to another but within an individual country many different cultures can be found.

Africa was the birthplace of the human species between 8 million and 5 million years ago. Today, the vast majority of its inhabitants are of indigenous origin. People across the continent are remarkably diverse by just about any measure: They speak a vast number of different languages, practice hundreds of distinct religions, live in a variety of types of dwellings, and engage in a wide range of economic activities.

Over the centuries, peoples from other parts of the world have migrated to Africa and settled there. Historically, Arabs have been the most numerous immigrants. Starting in the 7th century ad, they crossed into North Africa from the Middle East, bringing the religion of Islam with them. A later movement of Arabs into East and Central Africa occurred in the 19th century. Europeans first settled in Africa in the mid-17th century near the Cape of Good Hope, at the southern end of the continent. More Europeans immigrated during the subsequent colonial period, particularly to present-day South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Algeria. South Asians also arrived during colonial times. Their descendants, often referred to as Indians, are found largely in Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, and South Africa.

People of Kenya

Currently there are more than 40 different ethnic groups in Kenya.

The main groups of tribes are the Bantu who migrated from western Africa, the Nilotic people who originated from Sudan and the Hamitic group, who were mainly pastoral tribes from Ethiopia and Somalia. The main tribes are Kikuyu (21%), Meru (5%), Kalenjin, Luyha, Luo (14%), Kisii, Kamba, Swahili, Maasai, and Turkana.

The other large ethnic groups include the Luo, Luhya, Kamba and Kalenjin. A small population is made up of several groups. This includes the tribe of El Molo.

On our trip, many of the people we will meet are of the Kikuyu tribe. We will visit the villages of the Samburu, possibly the Turkana, and the Maasai. The people of the primitive tribes are slowly being educated to some degree and many have left their villages and made their home elsewhere. Those people of the primitive tribes who do not leave their villages still practice the same way of life that their ancestors did many years ago.

People of Kenya

Kikuyu

The Kikuyu are Bantu and actually came into Kenya during the Bantu migration (see

<http://www.kenyaweb.com/history/settlements/index.html>

for further information about the Bantu migration).

The Kikuyu migrated to their present location about four centuries ago and are Kenya's largest ethnic group. According to tradition, the founder of the tribe was a man named Gikuyu. *Ngai* (the Divine Spirit) took him to the top of Kirinyaga and commanded him to establish his home there. Mumbi, his wife, was provided for him by *Ngai*, and they had nine daughters, from which the different principal clans originated.

Like many tribes, the Kikuyu base their organization on the family unit (*nyumba*). Several families are combined to form a homestead (*mucii*), which is part of a sub-group (*mbari*). These make up the nine clans (*muhiriga*), which are the *Achera*, *Agachiku*, *Airimu*, *Ambui*, *Angare*, *Anjiru*, *Angui*, *Aithaga*, and *Aitherandu*. (A tenth clan is sometimes added, but only nine are counted as it is supposed to bring bad luck to count people, children, or livestock or to say the number ten).

Youths who wished to become warriors (*anake*) had to undergo circumcision. Warriors graduated to the council of elders (*kiama*), of which a few composed the secret council (*njama*). The council settled disputes. Those disputes that it could not resolve were determined by the ordeal of the hot knife (the extent of blistering on the tongue was then used to determine guilt or innocence) or, alternatively, by taking an oath on the *githathi* stone.

The Kikuyu were extremely successful in expanding throughout the area that is now the Central Province. This was achieved through a combination of purchases, blood brotherhood, and intermarriage with the area's original inhabitants.

Traditionally the Kikuyu are farmers. The Kikuyu homelands, in the foothills of Mount Kenya, are still some of the most intensively farmed areas of the country. The Kikuyu grow bananas, sugarcane, arum lily, yams, beans, millet, maize, black beans and a variety of vegetables. While these form the basis of their diet, they also raise cattle, which provide hides for bedding, sandals, and carrying straps. Sheep and goats are used for religious sacrifices and purification.

Pots are made by the Kikuyu for a variety of domestic uses, and were used for barter in the past. Woven baskets and flat trays are made from a variety of fibers, and arrowheads, spears, swords, and other metal items were manufactured by blacksmiths.

Local markets were held in populated areas regularly, in which livestock, agricultural produce, iron implements, tobacco, salt and ochre were bartered. Trading contacts were maintained with other tribes, especially the Maasai, Kamba, and Okiek. Women transported barter goods in caravans and were generally safe and under the protection of a middleman (*hinga*), who represented the group with whom they intended to trade.

In the Kikuyu culture boys and girls are raised very differently. The girls are raised to work in the farm and the boys usually work with the animals. The girls also have the responsibility of taking care of a baby brother or sister and helping the mother out with household chores.

In the Kikuyu culture family identity is carried on by naming the first boy after the father's father and the second after the mother's father. The same goes for the girls; the first is named after the father's mother and the second after the mother's mother. Following children are named after the brothers and sisters of the grandparents,

starting with the oldest and working to the youngest. Along with the naming of the children was the belief that the deceased grandparent's spirit, that the child was named after, would come in to the new child. This belief was lost with the increase in life span because generally the grandparents are now still alive when the children are born.

Though they are traditionally agricultural people and have a reputation as hard-working people, a lot of them are now involved in business. Most of the Kikuyu still live on small family plots but many of them have also seen the opportunities in business and have moved to cities and different areas to work. They have a desire for knowledge and they believe that all children should receive a full education. They have a terrific reputation for money management and it is common for them to have many enterprises at one time. The Kikuyu have also been active politically.

The Kikuyu quickly learned the political system introduced by Western culture and formed the Kikuyu Association in 1920. The Association drew up a list of grievances and delivered it to the Chief Native Commissioner. The list changed little during the colonial period with forced labor, land expropriation, and the lack of public services and educational opportunities being the major issues. They were instrumental in the fight for independence and one Kikuyu man, named Johnstone Kamau, would one day emerge as Jomo Kenyatta, first President of the Republic of Kenya and was a major figure in Kenya's fight for independence.

People of Kenya

Samburu

The Samburu are a proud warrior-race of cattle-owning pastoralists, a section of the Maa-speaking people amongst whom the Maasai are the best known. They are related to the Maasai but their dialect is spoken in a more rapid manner than that of the Maasai, but includes many words that are common to both.

The name 'Samburu' is also of Maasai origin, '*Samburr*' being the traditional leather bag specific to them, which is used for carrying meat and honey on their backs.

They dwell in the highlands of northern Kenya, just above the equator where the foothills of Mount Kenya merge into the northern desert, but their land was never a part of the white highlands previously inhabited by European settlers and ranchers. It lay in the remote and much more arid northern frontier for which a special travel document was required. A requirement that extended for a few years even after Kenya attained its independent status. Previously no one other than Government Officials could travel within any part of the Northern Frontier District (NFD), a Somali predominant region, and due to this, the Samburu tribe was virtually isolated and largely unaware of the momentous changes taking place within the rest of the country. Even today, Samburuland remains remote and unspoiled, having escaped the negative impact of mass tourism.

The ancient history and exact origin of the Samburu people is difficult to trace beyond a period of about one hundred years. Events recorded orally soon became interwoven with mythology, merging into one. Some believe their origin could be in the Sudan, but others, within Egypt, the descendants of a lost battalion of Roman soldiers. True Maasai tribesmen call them 'The Butterfly People', an offshoot of the main tribe that remained behind while others pushed further south. Fiercely pastoral, the Samburu people are totally committed to their stock, almost to the virtual exclusion of everything else.

The Samburu center their lives around their cows, sheep, goats, and camels. Their cattle are their life, their wealth, their livelihood and the symbol of status and success within the tribe. Since, like the true Maasai, they believe that all cattle rightfully belong to them, cattle raiding of other tribes has always been a major preoccupation of the warriors. Milk is their main stay; sometimes it is mixed with blood. They frequently take blood from an animal by puncturing an artery in the neck, but the animal is not killed. Meat is only eaten on special occasions. On occasion they make soups from roots and bark and eat vegetables if living in an area where they can be grown.

Proud of their culture and traditions, the Samburu still cherish and retain the customs and ceremonies of their forbearers, unlike most other tribes in Kenya who have been influenced by western civilization. Most dress in very traditional clothing of bright red material used like a skirt and multi-beaded necklaces, bracelets and earrings, especially when living away from the big cities.

The Samburu have many traditions and ceremonies for every occasion including the killing of a sheep for the birth of a baby, initiation or graduation rites as they prepare to become adults and marriage ceremonies that may occur after the initiation ceremony. Girls generally marry between the ages of 12 and 15 and boys usually, in their mid twenties. Boys become morani or junior warriors for about five years and then go through another ceremony to become a senior warrior.

As soon as a male of the tribe has been circumcised, he joins an age-set comprised of all the young men so initiated within a period of about fourteen years and he will maintain a close affinity with these peers until death. Girls do not have any age-set grouping, passing instead through two stages of life, namely girlhood and womanhood. The men on the other hand pass through three, boyhood from birth to adolescence before entering an age-set, moranhood, from circumcision to marriage when they are warriors and elderhood, from marriage until death. The most significant event in a boy's life is his elevation from *childhood* to *manhood* as a result of circumcision. This takes place when he is between the ages of fourteen and twenty-five. The moran, or warriors, are the most striking members of Samburu society and are inevitably attractive to young girls. They

enjoy a convivial and relatively undemanding life with permissive sex for roughly 14 years. Most of them will at one time or another have many lovers who demonstrate affection with lavish gifts of beads. The moran are flamboyant in their dress and very vain, frequently applying abstract designs in orange to their faces and red ochre to their heads, necks and shoulders and spending hours braiding each others' long ochred hair. Fearless and arrogant, he is in his prime during this period, free to do largely exactly as he likes.

Samburu girls hope to become "beaded" by their favorite warrior. If the young man likes the girl, he will give her layers of necklaces and pay the price of cattle and sheep as a dowry. The boys and girls traditionally perform a love dance. During the dance, the young men fling their ochre-colored hair in the face of the girl they wish to meet.

Samburu society is polygamous. The family lives and shares the same *manyatta* (village) and it is the women who are entirely responsible for the home.

Girls train for motherhood at an early age by helping with the household chores, and caring for their siblings. When adolescent girls attend dances organized by the moran of their clan, they are acutely aware of the importance of looking their best at such gatherings. They paste ochre onto their shaven heads, darken their eyebrows with charcoal, and paint intricate designs on their faces. She is then likely to earn praise from a moran, probably becoming a mistress to him and enjoying his protection. This relationship is forged by mutual physical and sexual attraction, although each knows that their relationship has no future. Since both come from the same clan, marriage is forbidden. Over the years the moran will heap beads upon his lover as a symbol of his love and while the girls may feel passionately about a certain man, they are taught from an early age that these feelings are irrelevant, for they will never be able to wed someone of their own choosing. Girls are taught that the marriage bond is not based on physical attraction or emotion, but instead that it is a long-term sound investment forged by her family.



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People of Kenya

Maasai

The Maasai people are synonymous with east Africa. The tall, proud Maasai number approximately 350,000 and are found mainly in north central Tanzania and southern Kenya. They speak Ol Maa (Nilotic) language. Maasai are the southernmost Nilotic speakers and are linguistically most directly related to the Turkana and Kalenjin who live near Lake Turkana in west central Kenya. The ancestors of the Maasai ('speakers of the Maa language') originated along the Nile River in what is now southern Sudan and slowly migrated both east and south to settle in the area straddling the Kenya-Tanzania border, an area that today is known as the Serengeti (if you are in Tanzania) or the Masai-Mara (if you are in Kenya). Here the open grasslands were perfectly suited to their semi-nomadic pastoral lifestyle and by the mid-1800s the Maasai dominated the area and were renowned for their cattle raids far beyond the borders of their territory. These sometimes bloody raids were justified by the belief that God (Enkai) had placed all cattle on earth specifically for the ancient Maasai. This belief and the interconnectedness of a pastoral life devoted to cattle is emphasized by the saying "God gave us cattle and grass. Without grass there are no cattle, and without cattle there are no Maasai". Cattle are central to Maasai economy. They are rarely killed and then only for ceremonial purposes. Cattle are accumulated as a sign of wealth and traded or sold to settle debts. Their traditional grazing lands span from central Kenya into central Tanzania. Young men are responsible for tending to the herds and often live in small camps, moving frequently in the constant search for water and good grazing lands. At one time young Maasai warriors set off in groups with the express purpose of acquiring illegal cattle.

Milk is a vital product however and both fresh and curdled milk, stored in long, decorated gourds, is the staple of the Maasai diet. In a culinary feast, this is sometimes mixed with blood tapped from the jugular of a cow and then drunk.

According to Maasai oral history and the archaeological record, they also originated near Lake Turkana. Maasai have resisted the urging of the Tanzanian and Kenyan governments to adopt a more sedentary lifestyle. They have demanded grazing rights to many of the national parks in both countries and routinely ignore international boundaries as they move their great cattle herds across the open savanna with the changing of the seasons.

The Maasai live in small settlements of 8-15 huts per kraal. Their settlements are surrounded by a thorn bush fence as an added form of protection. The two-inch long thorns of the thorn bush are as sharp as barbed wire and the men are responsible for tying branches together to form the fence. In the evening, the cattle, goats, and other domestic animals are brought inside the kraal for protection against wild animals.

The huts take seven months to build and are built by the women of the village. They are built of branches, twigs, grass, and cow dung and urine formed into a plaster and applied to a branch frame. When the mixture dries in the sun it is as strong as cement and does not smell. Generally the huts are not very high, and the Maasai cannot stand up inside. The only openings are that of the doorway and a small opening in the roof or wall which allows smoke from a continually smoldering fire inside to escape. The fire is used to cook and to keep the family warm during the rainy season. Dried cow dung is used as the fuel for the fire.

Inside, the family sleeps on beds of woven branches cushioned with dry grasses and animal skins. In some huts, small animals are brought into the hut in the evening to help protect them from larger and more dangerous animals as well as the cold.

Maasai often travel into towns and cities to purchase goods and supplies and to sell their cattle at regional markets. Maasai are well known for their beautiful beadwork that plays an essential element in the ornamentation of the body. They sell their beautiful beadwork to the tourists. Beading patterns are determined by each age-set and identify age-grades. Characteristically, the Maasai wear a toga-like red garment (shukkas). The young men favor earrings, headbands, bead necklaces and braided hair covered with cow-grease and clay. The elaborate braids of young warriors are shaved off when they reach a marriageable age. Women shave their heads and wear colorful beads.

Many Maasai believed that education is not important for the herdsman to search for green grass to feed the cows. The Maasai have not strayed from the traditional basic ways of life. Farming for the trading of crops such as corn and vegetable is done by some Maasai. But by rejecting the cash economy and refusing to settle or become farmers has made life difficult and harsh.

The Maasai prefer to remain nomadic herdsman, moving as their needs necessitate. This is becoming more difficult in modern times as their open plains disappear. Remarkably, despite increasing urbanism all over Africa, many Maasai remain true to their pastoral roots and continue to live their traditional way of life seemingly untouched by the 21st century. Young men, who often cover their bodies in ochre to enhance their appearance, may spend hours and days working on ornate hairstyles, which are ritually shaved as they pass into the next age-grade.

Maasai community politics are embedded in age-grade systems that separate young men and prepubescent girls from the elder men and their wives and children. When a young woman reaches puberty she is usually married immediately to an older man. In order for men to marry they must first acquire wealth, a process that takes time. Women, on the other hand, are married at the onset of puberty to prevent children being born out of wedlock. All children, whether legitimate are not, are recognized as the property of the woman's husband and his family. The Maasai are polygamous and the young man's parents select the bride and determine when the young man will take another bride. Approximately seven cows are paid to the bride's parents as dowry. Maasai practice circumcision for both boys and girls. For a boy, circumcision is one of a series of steps up the clan hierarchy.

The Maasai regard wildlife as sacred, but predators such as lions are a threat to their herds and have traditionally been hunted by groups of warriors or morani. This is one of the rites of passage, enabling a young warrior to display his courage, as characteristic of the culture as its milk and blood diet. In an adrenaline-filled exercise a group of young warriors confront and attempt to kill a stock-killing lion using only their traditional spears and hide shields. A successful hunt is celebrated in a spectacular dance called engilakinoto that culminates in powerful vertical leaps designed to display the strength and exuberance of the warriors. This is a custom that continues to this day, but which is coming into increasing conflict with modern wildlife managers and the laws of Kenya.



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People of Kenya

Turkana

The Turkana are the second largest group of nomadic pastoralists in Kenya – numbering over 200,000. They live in Turkana land, a dry and hot region in northwest Kenya. They occupy a rectangular area by Lake Turkana in northern Kenya and the region is bordered by Ethiopia on the east, Uganda on the west, Sudan on the north. South of them live the Pokot (Pökoot), Rendille, and Samburu. The language of the Turkana, an eastern language, is also called Turkana; their own name for it is Ng'aturk(w)ana.

Traditional dress and ornaments is of vital importance, much emphasis being placed on adornment of both women and young Moranis (warriors). Brightly colored beads frequently hide their necks. Any object, even the most simple and ordinary in western eye is greatly sought after as an ornament to increase their charm.

The Turkana are noted for weaving baskets.

In their oral traditions they designate themselves the people of the gray bull, after the Zebu (sometimes known as “humped cattle”), the domestication of which played an important role in their history. In recent years, development aid programs have aimed at introducing fishing among the Turkana (a tabu in Turkana society) with varying success. Livestock is an important aspect of Turkana culture. Goats, camels, donkeys, and sheep are the primary herd stock utilized by the Turkana people. In this society, livestock functions not only as a milk and meat producer, but as a form of currency used for bride-price negotiations and dowries. Oftentimes, a young man will be given a single goat or sheep with which to start a herd, and he will accumulate more via animal husbandry. In turn, once he has accumulated sufficient livestock, these animals will be used to negotiate for wives. It is not uncommon for Turkana men to lead polygamistic lifestyles, since livestock wealth will determine the amount of respective wives that he can negotiate for and support.



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