

Ohio University
Center for International Studies

**Country Profile:
The Republic of Kenya**

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Geography

Kenya is a country located in East Africa bordering the Indian Ocean, and also shares country borders with Uganda, Tanzania, Sudan, Ethiopia, and Somalia. Kenya covers an area of 582,646 square kilometers (slightly more than twice the size of the state of Nevada), with 536 kilometers of coastline.

The terrain of Kenya is very diverse, comprising mountain ranges (most notably, Mount Kenya, Africa's 2nd-highest peak), a series of plateaus in the "low belt" of inland Kenya, the cool and agriculturally-rich Kenyan highlands of the Western and Central part of the country, and the Great Rift Valley.

Kenya has seven provinces, with a total of 40 districts. The capital, Nairobi, is its own administrative district, as it has more than twice the population of any other major city in Kenya. Other major Kenyan cities are Mombasa (coast), Malindi (coast) Kisumu (western) and Nakuru (Western).

Climate

Kenya enjoys a variety of climates throughout its territory. The southern coastal region is very tropical, experiencing substantial rainfall throughout the year and is known for having high rates of humidity (average annual temperatures range between 22-30 degrees Celsius, or about 70- 86 degrees Fahrenheit). However, the north and eastern part of the country is arid and very dry, with annual temperatures averaging 24-35 degrees Celsius (75-95 degrees Fahrenheit). Nairobi and most of south-western Kenya are of

temperate climates, receiving moderate to high rainfalls throughout the year with temperatures ranging between 10-25 degrees Celsius (50-77 degrees Fahrenheit).

Kenyan seasonal changes are identified according to rainfall and temperature. The long rains occur from April to June and short rains from October to December. The hottest period is from February to March and coldest in July to August. If we were to compare a Kenyan seasonal year to a U.S. seasonal year, we could say that seasons in Kenya occur at exactly opposite times as seasons in the U.S.- a Kenyan “winter” occurs during our summer, while a Kenyan “summer” occurs during our winter. Regardless of the seasons, there is plenty of sunshine all the year round and summer clothes are worn throughout the year.

History

Early History

Kenya is part of a region of the world called the “cradle of humanity”, as the earliest forms human beings, hominids, have been traced to this spot starting about 4 million years ago. Entire kingdoms and developed cultures date as far back as 2,000 B.C., starting in the Stone and Iron Ages.

Kenya has a long history of trade that has both molded and defined the cultural diversity and richness of its territory (see “demographics” and “culture” for more on the diversity of Kenya). Historians believe that Arab and Persian commerce in East Africa dates as far back as the 2nd century AD, followed by trade with India starting around the 7th century AD. The first interactions with Europeans did not occur until around the 16th century, marked by the arrival of the Portuguese. The merging of African, Arab, and

Indian peoples along the East African coast (from southern Somalia to northern Mozambique) introduced a variety of customs that have since been integrated in the unique Swahili culture of Kenya, as well as creating an entire language- Kiswahili. A Bantu African language with many Arabic words, Kiswahili originally developed as a *lingua franca* for trade between the different peoples converging in Kenya, and exists today as a major world language (see section on “language” for more information on Kiswahili).

One of the most important aspects of early trade and cultural interaction in Kenya was the evolution of the slave trade in East Africa. The slave trade in this region of Africa was conducted by both Arabs and Europeans. Arabs had been trading African slaves for over 1000 years, taking them to the Arabian Peninsula, Persian Gulf, and other regions of Asia. European slave traders came later in the 17th century, taking African slaves to various islands in the Indian Ocean and the Americas. In total, an estimated 7 to 10 million Africans were taken as slaves across the Indian Ocean (in comparison, around 12 million are believed to have been taken as slaves across the Atlantic Ocean).

Colonial History

Around the beginning to mid-19th century, new ideas and beliefs in social and political thought gave rise to anti-slavery movements throughout Europe. As a result, the slave trade in Africa was eventually banned. In Kenya, the slave trade officially ended in 1847. However, the end of the trade only fueled increased European interests in the resources and land of the African territories. As a result, European countries began to set up colonies throughout the continent. In 1884, at the Conference of Berlin, the African continent was divided into colonial territories among the major European powers, of

which Kenya became a colony of Great Britain. The British set up the Kenya colony as a “settler colony”- a colonial territory in which its settlers established permanent residence- and governed it using a system of direct rule. Direct rule is a strategy in which British governors would use local tribal leaders as intermediaries between their rule of the province and the local peoples.

Resistance to British colonial rule began around 1921, with the creation of Kenya’s first African political protest movement, the Young Kikuyu Association. This association eventually turned into the Kenya Africa Union, which would serve as the foundation for Kenya’s first political party in the post-independence period. In 1952, Kenyan rebels (organized by the Kenya Africa Union) launched a rebellion against the British. The *Mau Mau rebellion*, which lasted from 1952-1959, set the stage for Kenya’s independence. Kenya obtained official independence from Great Britain on December 12, 1963.

Post-Colonial History

The first President of Kenya was Jomo Kenyatta, the famed leader of the Mau Mau Rebellion and the head of Kenya’s first political party, the Kenya Africa National Union (KANU). He was elected to office a year after independence was declared, in accordance with the official declaration of Kenya as a Republic in 1964. Kenyatta was succeeded by his vice-President, Daniel arap Moi, following his death in 1978. In 1982, Moi revised the Constitution of Kenya to declare it a *de jure* one-party state, in which he ruled Kenya under a strict dictatorship. It wasn’t until mounting pressures from local opposition groups in Kenya and from the international community resulted in a reversal of the one-party state rule and allowed for free multiparty elections in 1991. Moi was re-

elected as President in both the 1992 and 1997 presidential elections (albeit under suspicious circumstances, in which opposition leaders would “disappear” and ballot boxes were allegedly “stuffed”), but was replaced in 2002 by a democratically-elected Mwai Kibaki. Kenya’s next presidential and parliamentary elections will occur this December 2007.

Politics

The government of Kenya is a presidential representative democratic republic, in which the President is both the head of state and the head of government, elected to terms of 5 years. In addition to the Executive branch, Kenya also has a legislative branch- a unicameral National Assembly comprised of 224 members (210 members elected for a five year term in single-seat constituencies, 12 members nominated by political parties on a proportional representation basis and 2 ex officio members: the attorney general and the speaker)- and a Judiciary. Since 1992, Kenya has been a multi-party system.

Demographics

The current population of Kenya is 36,913,712. While all nationals of Kenya are called “Kenyans”, there are over 40 different ethnic groups within the country. Historically, the main groups (or “tribes”) are of Bantu descent that migrated from western Africa. The main ethnic groups in Kenya are the Kikuyu (22%), Luhya (14%), Luo (13%), Kalenjin (12%), Kamba (11%), Kisii (6%), and Meru (6%). Ethnic affiliation is a very important part of Kenyan life and culture, as one’s identity and customs are directly linked to ethnic identity. Because of Kenya’s long and rich history of trade, there are many Kenyans of non-Bantu descent, namely Arabs (who reside largely along the

coast), Europeans, Indians, and even Chinese. These non-African peoples compose only about 1% of Kenya's total population, though as trade and business in Kenya grows, so are these non-African populations.

One of the most well known ethnic groups from Kenya are the Maasai, a nomadic people's whose dress and traditional ways of life have made them very popular for anthropological study and a major tourist attraction. The Maasai live primarily in the southern part of Kenya, where they subsist off of farming and cattle herding. They are known for their colorful, beautiful beaded jewelry and their red/blue patterned blankets. While there are laws in Kenya that aim to protect the traditional lifestyles of the Maasai, the Maasai are finding it increasingly difficult to remain nomadic due to the ever-growing influence of the modern economy and land reform laws.

Religion

A large majority of Kenyans ascribe to some form of Christianity, with 45% of the population Protestants and 33% Roman Catholic. These religious connections came from the early missionary activities of colonialism. About 10% of the population is Muslim, residing mostly in the coastal region and in the eastern side of the country. The remainder is a combination of other minority religions, such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and ancestral tribal beliefs. It should be noted, however, that while the greater majority of African Kenyans are Christian, many find it important to incorporate aspects of traditional beliefs with their religious beliefs. For example, it is customary for communities of traditionally-farming ethnic groups to pray to ancestors for blessings during a harvest season. Also, many animals (such as cattle, sheep, and goat) and natural phenomena (rain, thunder, lightning, mountains, etc.) are often associated with God and

considered to be sacred. Such indigenous beliefs and practices are often seen as complements to mainstream religious followings.

Culture

In Kenyan culture, kinship and community are central. Tribes and ethnic groups are normally determined by geographical region and common culture, and each group has its own social and political organization. A deep sense of kinship (connection through blood and marriage) is one of the strongest forces in traditional society. Kinship governs marital customs (such as dowry, which is still practiced in both traditional and cosmopolitan areas) and even dictates the behavior of one individual towards another, both within the same group and outside of the group.

Traditionally, the family includes children, parents, grandparents, uncles, aunts, brothers and sisters whom may have their own children, and other immediate relatives. In some ethnic groups in which polygamy (multiple wives) is still practiced, the family is extended to include all of the relatives of all the wives.

In recent times, the concept of the family/community unit has been altered due to the rapid increase of urbanization. Whether out of economic necessity or the draw of city life, it is becoming increasingly common for children to move to the city for employment as they grow up. As a result, families are more spread out and less able to physically depend upon one another. Regardless of the geographical situation, however, a strong belief in duties to the family and community remain in tact for most urban Kenyans.

Food is also a very important part of Kenyan culture. Rice, bananas, maize and beans are staple foods for all Kenyans, and through interaction with Europeans, Arabs, and Indians over the centuries, many “traditional” Kenyan dishes are actually a reflection

of their much globalized culture. *Ugali*, a mush made from maize, is served daily and often with a spinach or kale dish called *sukumawiki*. *Chapati*, a fried pita-like bread of Indian origin, is served with vegetables dishes (such as cabbage, carrots, and potatoes) and stew. Many vegetable stews are flavored with coconut, spices, and chilies. Although meat is not eaten everyday, or is eaten in small quantities, smoked “bush meat” called *nyama choma* is a favorite among locals and tourists alike.

Finally, religion is an important aspect of culture and everyday life. For information about Kenyan religious followings and practices, see sections on “Religion” and “Customs”.

Customs and Lifestyles

Customs and lifestyles contrast greatly between urban and rural cultures in Kenya. Kenya’s cities are characterized by a cosmopolitan population which reflect a culture mixed with both local and global influences. For example, nightlife in Nairobi caters to a globalized youth interested in music that varies from American rock, R&B, hip-hop, to East African *Bongo Flavor*. The city has movie theaters, nightclubs, and even amusement parks. However, urban life is very different across cities in Kenya. Mombasa, for example, is predominately a Muslim town. While the city has restaurants, bars, and nightclubs like those in Nairobi, there are also many Mosques and standards of dress for women which reflect the dominant Islamic culture.

Rural life tends toward the more traditional, with women staying at home to play the role of caretaker to children and they perform some agricultural duties, while the men attend to traditional hunter-gatherer roles as well as protection and governance of local communities. However, this is not to say that rural peoples are out of the “mainstream”;

with advances in transportation and in means of trade and economic opportunity, many rural dwellers have become accustomed to visiting and trading in markets and shopping centers, and find entertainment at local pubs and “mobile” cinemas.

Whether rural or urban, there is no doubt that Kenyans, as a whole, love to party. Music and dance play an integral role in social and religious life. Rhythm is largely provided by drums accompanied by wind and stringed instruments.

Another custom shared by both rural and urban Kenyans alike are styles of dress. African Kenyan women wear *kangas*- large, rectangular pieces of cloth printed in bold designs and bright colors. Kangas are sold in matching pairs, and each is big enough to cover a person from neck to knee, or chest to toe. Women wear them everywhere; around the house, they are tied around the chest or waist and used as a kind of apron, and in public, one piece is worn around the waist and the matching piece around the shoulders. Although kangas come in thousands of colors and designs, a woman will wear a particular kanga on a given day according to the message inscribed on the cloth. Each kanga has a Swahili saying or proverb, many of which are religious or relate a traditional family value. For example, if a woman is going to church, she will wear a kanga that relates to the greatness of God, or if she is going to visit her mother-in-law, her kanga will have a saying regarding the virtues of motherhood. Women also use kangas to carry children on their backs.

Along the coast and amongst Muslims in Kenya, fashion tends to follow both traditional Islamic guidelines as well as modern conservative styles. For traditional Muslim women and for all Muslim women during holidays, women wear *hijabs* (shawls used to cover the head and neck) and *abayas* (long dresses that cover the body with

exception of the neck, hands, and feet). For many Muslim women in the city, the *hijab* is still worn, though any combination of modest dress (long sleeve shirts and long skirts or pants) may replace the *abaya*. The same is true of Muslim men; on holidays and for certain sects of Islamic following, men wear long tunics and *taqiyah* (white Islamic hats), but for the rest of the week, men often wear jeans or slacks and long shirts.

In conjunction with their religious observances and duties in social life, Kenyans observe most Christian holidays, as well as the Muslim festival *Id al-Fitr*, which marks the end of Ramadan. *Jamhuri*, or Independence Day, is celebrated on December 12. Moi Day (a holiday for former president Daniel arap Moi) and Kenyatta Day (for first president Jomo Kenyatta) are both in October, while Madaraka (“Government Day” in Swahili), which celebrates Kenya’s attainment of self-governance in 1964, is June 1.

Language

The official language of Kenya is English. All government activities and public services (such as primary school education) are conducted in English. However, due to its cultural and historical significance, Kiswahili is the official *national* language of the country. As a national language, it is the dominant language used in everyday life, such as in the home, at markets, with friends, etc. Kiswahili is taught in conjunction with English in schools at the secondary level, as it is assumed that all children are raised speaking Kiswahili at home. Additionally, there is an indigenous language associated with each ethnic group, meaning that Kenya is home to over 40 additional indigenous languages and hundreds of dialects. Arabic is also a popular and common language spoken on the coast amongst many Arab- Kenyans. In all, the average Kenyan speaks

three languages- the “mother tongue” (the language of their ethnic group), Kiswahili, and English.

What Kids Do For Fun

Like the variations in lifestyles between the rural and urban areas of Kenya, life for children in Kenya varies accordingly. Rural areas and dense urban areas are characterized by extreme poverty, and therefore children living in these areas must take on work duties to contribute to the financial wellbeing of the family. In urban areas, it is not uncommon to see children selling small goods, like ground nuts and plastic bags, at markets and in the streets. In rural areas, children’s duties often involve helping the mother in activities such as obtaining clean water (which often involves traveling long distances by foot to a watering hole), preparing fruits and vegetables for dinner, and even in making goods to be sold at markets. Many children in these impoverished situations do not go to school, and thus they spend most hours of their days performing these job-like duties. For children in middle- and upper- class families that do have the means to go to school, they spend the majority of their days in class and additional time at home to school work. However all children, of any class and economic means, have household chores that they are obligated to do.

Rich or poor, rural or urban, all kids in Kenya find time for fun. Amongst rural children, kids play wherever there is open space, and spend most of their free time swimming in ponds and rivers, playing ball, or playing with stray dogs. In the city, children can find entertainment by sitting outside a radio shop listening to music or news, or by standing outside of a television store, watching TV through the window. Like rural kids, urban children also find joy in playing ball games in playgrounds. For children in

middle- and upper-class families, sources of fun and entertainment are much more reminiscent of entertainment for American children, in which video games and watching television or movies in the home are much more common.

Resources:

<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ke.html#Geo>

<http://kenya.rcbowen.com/geography/>

<http://exploringafrica.matrix.msu.edu/students/curriculum/m19/activity1.php>

http://www.wvi.org/wvi/country_profile/profiles/kenya.htm

http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/country_profiles/1024563.stm

http://edhelper.com/ReadingComprehension_Geography_78_1.html

<http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-259584/Kenya>